It's not family without love

by AgapantoBlu

Summary

Snippets of an AU in which Nicky takes the twins in when they are five and he's twenty and he tries his hardest.

The kids will be alright, hopefully.

Notes

This is called PanickedDad!AU and I love the definition very much.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Nicky vs The Heterosexual Agenda

Arc I: Childhood

One day, Nicky will get into a fist-fight with a soccer mom and lose the twins. He knows it, it’s unavoidable. He’ll step in somewhere and one fourty-something white good Christian lady will take a look at his dark skin and the two kids hanging from his hands and will sneer while making assumptions on how he is straight and unaware of the existence of condoms. And he’ll deck her in the face because he’s just really, really tired of taking people’s lashes with a bowed head.

This time, though, he ignores Mrs Simmons’ unashamed stare and just focuses on preventing Andrew’s latest attempt at evading from the shopping cart. “Drew, come on,” he mutters, pushing slightly at the tiny foot that’s almost above the metal edge. “I told you we’ll get ice-cream for last, okay? It will melt before we reach home if we pick it up now.”

Blessedly, Aaron seems too caught in pretending to read the label of a can of beans to aid his brother in his dreams of freedom, but maybe the fact that he got to seat on the children’s spot is what’s actually stopping him.

Andrew doesn’t answer, but he never does so Nicky doesn’t let it worry him.

It’s a lie. He worries, he worries so much because he’s had the twins since six months already and Andrew has yet to speak a word. They’re five and Aaron can speak perfectly well so why not Andrew? He’s been considering bringing him to a doctor, but his bank account had laughed in his face at the mere suggestion of looking for a speech therapist.

Not speaking aside, Andrew is too goddamn smart for his own good. It’s why Nicky can feel the bullshit coming when the toddler looks at him with slitted eyes and a half pout. Faster than Nicky can think of reacting, Andrew has already picked the bag of cookies from the cart and thrown it on the ground. “‘Drew!”

The jam jar gets terrifyingly close to meet the same fate, but Nicky catches it in time, just to hear a metal noise behind himself.

Aaron struggles to turn enough to stare at his brother, an hopeful expression on his baby face as he seeks for Andrew’s approval. The can of beans on the floor is dented now. Just perfect.

“Alright, no, we’re not making this a new game, alright? We don’t throw stuff on the floor.” He puts both things again in the cart, but Andrew goes for the cookies again. “What did I just tell you?” Nicky hisses, catching it on the edge of the cart. “What’s wrong with these cookies, ‘Drew? You love cookies!”

That Andrew has a sweet tooth the size of Russia is something Nicky came to learn after leaving him with the box of chocolate chip cereals on the table as he went to help Aaron go to the
bathroom. He’d come back to an empty box and a kid with his mouth smeared in chocolate. He’d been hovering for the next ten hours in fear all the sugar would give his boy a stomachache but it turned out Andrew was made of ghisa or something equally sturdy because he had the galls to glare at Nicky when lunch was just a bit late that day.

Nicky looks at the cookies. He strives not to curse. “Alright. Raisins. I get it.” He sighs. “I’m sorry, Drew. I got the wrong cookies. We can go get the chocolate chips ones later, how does it sound?”

For a kid who never utters a word and has only one consistent expression on his face, which is a scowl, Andrew is very good at expressing his disapproval with Nicky’s every other plan. Right now, he seems only slightly appeased by the promise and he keeps the wrong package of cookies held tight in his little fist, probably planning on throwing it again as soon as his patience runs out. Whatever, Nicky just needs to get dish soap and deodorant and get to the cookies aisle before it happens, easy peasy.

A metal sound again.

Nicky looks down to the sorry and now dented can of beans as if it could take pity on him and climb back into the cart on its own. As it clearly won’t, he looks at Aaron. “Why. What’s your problem with beans now? You like beans!”

Aaron gurgles something and moves his arms toward the can and his brother, eloquently, but keeps quiet. Nicky sighs and bends to pick the thing up.

“You kids are rather undisciplined, dear.” There. Nicky fucking called it. Fistfight with a soccer mom.

“They’re just tired, ma’am,” he forced himself to say, placing the article back in the cart and turning to the woman to offer her the best smile he could bring himself to muster after two consecutive shifts at Sweetie’s and the prospect of another one at Eden’s later in the night. “It’s been a long day. We’re sorry if we bothered you.”

Mrs Simmons wears clothes that probably costed Nicky’s salary of the whole day. Jeans, shirt and jacket all have an air of brand to them, and she has sunglasses on her head pulling her long hazel hair backward despite the cloudy weather they had. Nicky is also tempted to say the fuchsia lipstick on her mouth is a bit too bright for a grocery shopping trip, but he keeps it to himself. The boy to her side, standing close under the vicious grip of her arm around his shoulder, is wearing a fucking polo shirt and kaki pants and has the blankest expression Nicky ever saw on an eight year old.

She shakes her head again. “It’s not about bothering us, Nicholas; it’s about the kids not learning a proper behavior. What will you do when they’re older? How do you expect them to obey you if you let them stomp all over you?”

He wants to yell her the twins are five, had been given up for adoption just to be taken back by their addicted of a mother who turned out to be violent as fuck, and that after she overdosed Nicky had known better than letting his own parents take the children so they’ve been struggling to work as a family for barely half a year. So, yes, they’re adjusting. Yes, they’re a pain in the ass sometimes. And, yes, Nicky is a lousy excuse of an educator. But guess what? It’s still better than the alternatives. He’s still doing better than any good things every other member of their family did for them put together. And he kinda hopes not to turn his children into robots, anyway.

He doesn’t because Aaron is fidgeting and holding onto Nicky’s sleeve, eyes fixed on the adult
woman that looks so clearly displeased with him. They need to get out of the confrontation now. Andrew too is stomping his way in the cart closer to his brother and when he finally reaches him he looks up to the woman with a studying glare.

Nicky doesn’t like this one bit. “I think we’ll burn that bridge when we cross it, ma’am. If you’ll excuse us no—"

“That’s no way of thinking when you are a parent, young man. How can you expect to get them through school? See them to college? This attitude is what landed you in this predicament to begin with.”

*What do you know about us?*! The temptation to get into a fistfight is really, really growing. “Ma’am, I don’t think we—"

“I’m not even sure I should let you walk out of here with them,” Mrs Simmons goes on, undeterred. “Who knows in which conditions you’re making them live, if this is how you think to solve all your issues. Their behavior clearly shows you haven’t bothered much with teaching them any manners at all.”

“Miss, they’re five,” Nicky can’t help but counter. He almost immediately regrets it, because Aaron is getting much more fidgety now, and fights his seat to be let out and into Nicky’s arms, apparently. “I already apologized. I don’t know what else you—"

“Where is their mother?” Mrs Simmons inquires, undeterred. “The lack of her presence is probably influencing this behavior of theirs.”

Tilda’s influence definitely did a number on the twins’ behavior, Nicky has no intention of denying it ever. But damn, this is starting to attract the stares of a couple other people and with the social services still on his ass, he can’t afford making a scene. Gently, he tries to calm Aaron in low hushes and whispered reassurances, though he also tries to settle him back in his seat to try and push the cart far away as fast as possible.

Mrs Simmons just won’t let them off, though. “I am sorry to tell you this so bluntly, Nicholas, but I fear it falls to me if nobody else does,” she keeps on, undeterred. “You’re clearly unfit to parent these children. Indulging shamelessly out of wedlock and being, frankly, quite stupid about it doesn’t make you automatically fit for the role. These kids need a family and you clearly are absolutely unable to provide them with one.”

It shouldn’t hurt so much. Not from such an harpy, not over something as stupid as a temper tantrum, and not when every word streams from a great misunderstanding of the current dynamics at work; but Nicky has always been battling cruel voices in his head, and hearing them mirrored in real life is much harder.

It stings, and his voice just stutters a bit on his litany of kind words that he hadn’t realized he’d kept ongoing through the whole tirade, somehow.

“Hag.”

Nicky’s mouth slams open and his voice cuts off. Aaron’s subsided whimpers, low and held back because he’s still afraid crying will get him in troubles, fade out abruptly as he twists under Nicky’s hands to turn to the cart.

Mrs Simmons’ expression is priceless as she stares at Andrew’s defying eyes.

He keeps on staring, standing in the cart like a warrior on the warpath, and after a second he loudly,
crystal clear, repeats: “Hag.”

Nicky didn’t teach him that! He didn’t, right? Did he? Shit, when the social services find out what Andrew’s first word with Nicholas is they’re going to pack the twins’ things so fast.

“How dare you!” Mrs Simmons’ screeches. She’d approached them as she tore Nicky apart, so she’s close enough that she manages to whip her hand out before Nicky can even think about what she’s doing. “Listen here, you naughty—“

She grabs Andrew’s arm. Nicky can see the strength she’s putting into it by the way her wrist strains and he sees red even before Andrew’s bellowing scream fills the aisle.

Nicky is not a violent person, he’s never been. He’s always leant more to the lover side, than the hater. The moment the woman touches Andrew, though, all bets are off.

He pushes her by the shoulders, harsh enough that she goes stumbling backward and hits a shelf of rice packages. Nicky couldn’t care less.

Andrew is still screaming and he’s huddled on the bottom of the cart in some kind of hedgehog position. Aaron is crying openly now, terror filling his voice as he calls out “Drew! Drew!”

There are more bodies around them, Nicky can kind of register them from the corner of his eyes, but he pays them little mind. He pulls Aaron out of his seat, then bends inside the cart to try and gather Andrew in his other arm, taking advantage of how little the twins are.

Mrs Simmons is yelling, but Nicky looks at one of the staff members and growls, “She grabbed my kid and scared him,” and the man nods and points them to the end of the aisle. “We’ll take care of this,” he says. “Someone will get your groceries and—“

Fuck the groceries. Nicky stomps off with two terrified children screaming and crying in his arms and he swears in his mind he’s going to punch that awful woman in the face if she ever comes anywhere in a fifty steps range from the twins.

The air outside is cool, but the fire in his chest keeps burning.

It takes the three of them collectively half an hour to calm down. Nicky hopped into the backseat of his old car, let Andrew crawl off and into the corner against the opposite door and then focused on cuddling Aaron to his chest to get to stop sobbing before he got himself sick.

After the first fifteen minutes there had been silence, but Aaron hadn’t moved his face from pressed in Nicky’s chest and Andrew had yet to make any move to get closer to the two of them.

At the mid hour mark, Drew lifts his head resolutely, looks at Nicky dead in the eyes and says: “Hag.”

And Nicky knows he shouldn’t, he knows, but he’s tired and stressed and he feels ready to start crying himself so he just lets himself snort loudly. “She sure was, buddy. A real hag.”

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“Hurt?”

Nicky looks over worriedly, but Andrew shakes his head. He doesn’t add anything, so maybe he’s back to non-verbal, but he frowns for a moment before taking a tentative crawl closer to the other two on the backseat. The temptation to scoop him up too is strong, but something in his attitude says the gesture wouldn’t be welcomed so Nicky lets him have his time.

After agonizing minutes, Andrew is finally sitting close to Nicky’s thigh and is staring at it with his usual pensive expression. Aaron looks at him, then mutters: “Drew?” Andrew looks up. “I like Nicky.”

Nicky has no idea how to take this. Does Andrew speak to Aaron when he’s not around to hear them? Did the two of them talk about him? Discuss whether he’s good or bad or scary? On one hand, he desperately wants to know what Andrew has been thinking of him; on the other, he is not sure he’s in the mental space to know his cousin had been scared of him the whole time.

Andrew huffs, the gesture enough to shake his cousin from his thoughts. When the kid looks down again, he pats Nicky’s thigh once, almost the ghost of a touch to be honest, before scooting back a few inches again.

Nicky tries very hard not to cry. “Thank you, ‘Drew,” he whispers. “I’m sorry today was such a bad day.”

Aaron makes some awkward gesture of reassurance trying to pat Nicky’s chest, which is just weird because he puts a bit too strength into it and aims straight for the nipple, making Nicky flinch for a second. Andrew just huffs again.

“Ice-cream.”

Since he’s still brushing his offended nipple, Nicky takes a moment to realize it’s not Aaron who’s been calling out food with the most demanding voice a kid can muster. “What?”

Contempt is the only possible word to use for Andrew’s look in his direction. “Ice-cream,” he repeats, cold. “You promised.”

Right. And as Nicky found out, Andrew is quite strict on the topic of promises. As he is on the topic of cookies and ice-cream flavors and books order and sheets color and an whole lot of other things.

For once, Nicky can’t find any irritation for the stubborn quirk in himself. “Right, little monster. Let’s get you two buckled up and we can have ice-cream for dinner tonight.” It’s not like there’s anything else in the fridge anyway.

Spending his three hours of freedom in one of his workplaces shouldn’t be funny, but Nicky sits at a table at Sweetie’s and watches Aaron gets his whole face dirty in pistachio and Andrew scarfing down his Double Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough cup while threateningly waving his spoon every time someone tries to steal a bite from him, and it’s not bad.

It’s not bad at all.
Aka, your daily reminder that some us knew we weren't straight quite early.

Also Little Baby Andrew gives me life and I've seen a post on Tumblr about him and Nicky having similar taste in men which cracked me up.

Tiny angst here, but tiny tiny.

He should probably feel guilty about this, right? He should. This is awful of him. The most awful thing ever. God, he’s disgusting, his father was right, he’s-

“No. No, no, no, not going there. Nope.”

He only realizes he’s spoken out loud when the Greek god kneeling in front of him tilts his head to the side. Nicky’s hands are still on his shoulders from where he pushed him off as soon as his thoughts were side-tracked by the intrusive snark of residual self-hatred.

Jesus, Nicky can’t believe this guy waited three hours for Nicky’s break after just chatting a bit at the counter as he prepared his drink. What the fuck. Nicky knows he is good-looking, and he dolls himself up for his shifts at Eden’s because the BDSM inclined clients here are the most generous tippers he’s ever seen. But really, this guy could have anyone. And he’s got a hint of German accent to his English that is to die for.

And Nicky just turned down a blow-job from him. Shit. He’s really turning into a parent, isn’t he?

“Sorry, I just-“ He runs a hand on his face. God, this is so embarrassing. The guy at least doesn’t even look upset, just curious as he keeps caressing Nicky’s thigh as if to reassure him. “My kids are upstairs.”

There. He said it.

He doesn’t know which is more mortifying, that he has to turn down a blow-job by the hottest guy ever because his twins are sleeping somewhere in the apartment above the club or that he was seriously going to get a blow-job by a guy with his kids sleeping just above him. Damn. This is getting too confused to be dealt with at three in the mornings.

Hot Guy frowns. “Yellow. If this is a role-play you’re into it’s fine, I’m not judging, but it’s not really, uh, my thing?”

Jesus. Nicky bursts out laughing but he’s half sure this is an hysterics response. He can’t figure out how his life could be an appealing role-play scenario for anyone, to be fair. “No, uh, no, really, not- ugh.” He shakes his head, trying to calm down. “I mean, for real. My kids are upstairs, my boss lets them sleep in the empty apartment she has up there when both I and their usual babysitter are on the same shift.”
For some reason, Hot Guy’s face clears up. “Oh! Oh, okay, that’s- yeah, that’s fine.” He gets up and he’s smiling, how the heck is he smiling as he stands. Nicky is tall but this guy’s almost a full head taller. And a good span wider at the shoulders. He probably could lift Nicky no big deal. Heck, he could probably lift Nicky, Andrew and Aaron at once. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have jumped straight to it.”

Baby, you could jump me every- Jesus, Nicholas, control yourself!

“I didn’t peg you for someone with kids already, though. You look pretty young."

He is. He’s 20. His boss got him a fake ID to work with alcohol he can’t even legally drink for himself. What kind of joke is his life?

“Boy, I’m not even straight,” he says, though, because he’s Nicky and he’s bad at dealing with his feelings. He’s good at flaunting his sexuality, though. Took him time, but he did it. Dude looks taken aback now, which is better than pitiful, at least. ‘Sorry, just- They’re my cousins and I am taking care of them for reasons. That you probably don’t want to hear anyway because this is your night out and you’d probably rather be doing something better than listening to me rambling. Which is fair, I mean, I wouldn’t like listening to me rambling, like, dude, shut the fuck up, you know? Of course you know, I mean, I am rambling, damn, I’m sorry, I’m shutting up now, I promise, I should probably go actually, because you probably want to find someone else to have fun with and I should really, really, go back to my shift because I can’t lose this job, the other one doesn’t pay as much, and I’m doing it again, I’m so sorry, sorry, shutting up now."

Nicky mimes closing his mouth with a lock and throwing the key away. He wishes he could do it for real, sometimes. His big mouth is the reason he gets in troubles for the most.

He’s surprised, but not too much, when the guy laughs. He’s very surprised when dude mimes picking up the imaginary key and re-opening his lock because, seriously, how cute is that? Nicky’s not a strong-willed man, really, and God is tempting him right now.

“I like to hear your ramblings,” dude says and he looks soft and understanding, not really pitying.

“You look like you could use someone to vent to, anyway. How long until your shift resumes? I wouldn’t want to get you fired, indeed.”

Nicky blinks. Oh dear. “Uh, I probably have another, like, ten minutes? Maybe?”

Dude nods. “Fine by me. Want to get some fresh air and tell me about these kids of yours?”

Sweet Mary stop him or Nicky will marry this guy before the end of the night.

His name’s Erik. He just moved from Germany because he got admitted to a prestigious college of some kind on a full scholarship. Which means he’s smart as fuck, smooth and holds Nicky’s hand as he lets out in clipped and flippant sentences the story of how he found out his dear aunt was an abusive asshole at her funeral and how his parents were apparently considering shipping her kids to some kind of far away boarding school or leaving them in the system.

Which also means Nicky waves concerns and praise away with his hand because, really, it doesn’t matter what he decided to do if he can’t do it well, you know?

“I think you’ll do well, eventually,” Erik says, which is somehow more reassuring than the
occasional, you’re doing your best, he gets at times when he talks about this. “You’re still adjusting too, it’s not just them. And it’s not like you had nine months to prepare yourself, you jumped straight into six years old. Kids at that age are wild. I would know, I have a sister who’s fifteen years younger than me, she’s six right now and she asked my mom if fire was solid, liquid or gas yesterday. Mom called to ask me. She said what do I go to college for if I can’t even help her in these moments.”

That makes Nicky laugh. He makes a mental note to check the answer on-line, too, because that sounds like a question Aaron would ask.

“Yeah, well, I better get good at this stuff soon,” he says, shrugging. He checks the time on his wrist and, yeah, he should hurry back in. He doesn’t want Roland to have to cover for him. The guy already baby-sits the twins in most of his nights off. “These kids are pretty high maintenance.”

Erik laughs as he follows. Nicky leads him back in and toward the counter and Erik orders another Gin Tonic. Nicky serves him and takes his bills only to belatedly realize there’s a piece of paper in the stack. Erik is already disappearing through the crowd when Nicky looks up.

He left his number written on the back of the card of some kind of German bar. Nicky slips it in the only pocket of his shorts and tries to hide his blush, but fails with the dumb smile on his lips.

“Andrew, dear, I love you so very much, but God help me, if you don’t get off that slide…”

Andrew stares at him, unbothered. Nicky knows why. The kid is six and has, or what?, written all over his face. Nicky himself doesn’t know or what.

“Andrew, I’m serious,” he says, bouncing Aaron in his arms and desperately hoping this won’t be another thing he decides to copy his twin with. Andrew being stubborn is enough of a fight as it is. “I’ll cry. You know I will.”

It’s not a big threat, but it’s the only one Nicky can honestly say he would follow through with.

Aaron is pliant against his chest, yawning every other minute and striving not to fall asleep even though it’d be a great time for a nap. Heck, Nicky could use a nap. But apparently not Andrew. Andrew could use affirming his monopoly on the slide tower for a bit more, and don’t mind that all the parents at the jungle gym already hate Nicky because his playful children won’t share or stop attempting to start brawls.

“Andrew, come on, we’ll have to go home sooner or later.” He tries again. “You know we can come back tomorrow, right?”

Andrew retreats even more on the tower and Nicky considers using ice-cream as bribe once again, but he knows he has to draw a line somewhere and the kids had sundaes for dinner last night when he was forced to stay late at Sweetie’s because Angela called in sick last minute.

“Andrew, if I have to come up to get you, everybody will laugh of me,” which is once again not a big threat. Nicky is a weak man. Aaron and Andrew already have more nightmares than any kids their age should, he lives in fear of adding on to them. “Can you at least tell me why you don’t want to go home?”

Ever since the accident at the mall, Andrew has been slightly more vocal. He speaks with practiced
ease, which means he and Aaron has to have been chatting this whole time when Nicky wasn’t around to see them. He’s only slightly hurt by that.

Andrew frowns, apparently considering, and Nicky caresses Aaron’s head when he brushes his face against Nicky’s chest. Poor kid’s ready to fall into coma. It’s actually weird that Andrew is so stubborn of staying out, when he’s usually the most passionate advocate of Aaron’s wishes and needs.

Nicky loves that they are so close to each others, he does. He’s just sometimes scared Andrew is erasing himself to cater to Aaron. But they are kids and twins and the books he read say it sometimes can happen, when one of the two takes up to role of protector, so he tries not to worry too much.

He would be much more happier about Andrew standing up for himself if he didn’t have a double shift at Eden’s waiting for him in a couple of hours.

“He doesn’t want you to go,” Aaron mumbles and Nicky looks down. “You got hurt.”

Nicky had to get a belligerent drunkard out, four nights prior. The dude had tried to shake him off and ended up elbowing him on the nose. Security took over after that so it was just a minor thing and Roland helped Nicky wash his face from the blood out so the kids wouldn’t hopefully notice anything. Apparently, it was for naught.

“How do you-?” Nicky speaks before he can stop himself and Andrew frowns at him, this time with legs bent in front of his chest and fists closed. He hates being lied to and Nicky can foresee this turning into one heck of a temper tantrum. “Okay. Well, it was just a little accident. I’m okay now, see?”

Andrew’s eyes flash and he honest to God bares his teeth. Nicky is shocked enough he almost misses Aaron stiffening in his arms.

“What?” He looks down, and Aaron’s eyes are glassy and far away, lost. He bounces the kid a couple of times before he manages to be looked in the face again.

Aaron’s little hand reaches out for his nose. “Mom,” he mutters, and doesn’t continue.

Nicky fills the blanks in. Aunt Tilda told often about how accident-prone her kids were. Not for the last time, he wishes he could bring her back just to kill her himself. And that he could sew his own mouth shut. Christ, he never says the right thing, does he?

“Aaron, you know I didn’t mean it that way, okay?” he tries, though his eyes move often to Andrew too.

He wants to tell that it really was an accident and nobody hurt him on purpose, but he really can’t bring himself to. With what they went through, the kids don’t need to be confused about how wrong it is for anyone to hurt anyone else. Nicky doesn’t need to make an example of himself, of how it is okay to justify someone for being violent toward him.

“The security guys got him,” he says instead, serious as if speaking to another adult, because he needs this to come through and stick. “You know Dave and Josh, right? They played bouncing knee with you and let Andrew use the comms, remember? They got the bad guy and kicked him out. They have his picture and gave it to anyone in the club so they know he’s not allowed to come back.”

Aaron blinks up to him as if Nicky was telling him the most absurd and amazing of the bedtime
stories. “Ever?” he asks, stressing the word almost like he’d never heard it before.

Nicky nods. “Never again,” he says, and he holds Aaron tighter to his chest. He adds, just barely loud enough to be heard by Andrew too, “We don’t let people who hurt us back in. People like that don’t deserve a second chance.”

He speaks big for someone who used to be willing to fall to his knees and beg just to have his parents acknowledge him again. When he’d received their last call, he thought it was the breakthrough he’d always hoped for, that they had come around finally. But it was just a cold and business-like eighteen seconds call to let him know his aunt was dead and when the funeral would be. His dad finished it with, “If you have to come, I’d rather you stay out of the church building.” Nicky had cried all night for that.

But then he’d went and got into the church and saw the twins and his brain went, yes, we’re taking care of these kids like nobody did for us.

If his parents were to come back now, he’s not even sure he’d answer the phone for them after seeing how cold they were to their own nephews.

“We have the right not to be hurt,” he says.

Andrew crawls forward to the top of the slide to study his face. Nicky doesn’t know what he finds, but Andrew dangles his legs for a moment before finally sliding down.

Nicky makes sure to catch him with one arm when he gets to the bottom, and Andrew lets himself be picked up. He only does so when he’s really too tired to walk for himself, which means he was really fighting to stay on the tower and keep Nicky from going back to a place where he’d been hurt.

Nicky has tears in his eyes. Sometimes it’s hard to take care of these kids, but some other times he feels himself heal from how loved he feels. It’s a rare occurrence for any of the twins to show it outwardly, but at times Aaron would draw the three of them and let Nicky hang the picture on the fridge, and Andrew would do things like these, extreme stuff for a kid that he pulls off just because he wants to protect Nicky. Moments like this, Nicky feels like everything he does is just a speck of dust in comparison of what he could do for these kids if the need ever arose.

No ice-cream, but he thinks he can spare the time to cut their veggies in funny shapes before he leaves for his shift. He might have to forego make-up, but it will be fine even if he doesn’t get as many tips, for once.

Erik is back.

Nicky kinda saw him going home with a hot dude in a fishnet shirt, last time, and he’d been surprised to find himself not really jealous. His first thought had been, damn, I’d love to be in the middle of that sandwich. He’d laughed so hard at himself he had to get some water.

Today, Erik is wearing a fishnet shirt. Nicky really didn’t know to have his fantasies confirmed.

“What use does a lawyer have for a six pack?” he asks before he can censor himself as he pours another Gin Tonic.
Erik’s eyes spark with mirth. “It’s supposedly helpful in wooing lovely baristas, but I fear it might not work.”

It works just fine, in Nicky’s opinion. Roland had wolf-whistled when they’d spotted Erik coming in at the entrance so, yeah, it’s not even a joke.

“You poor thing.‘ There’s not many people in yet. The night is long and it’s barely half past nine. Usually they don’t get clients until ten, but they are theoretically open even before. There’s a public watch of RuPaul’s Drag Race sometimes. Erik sits at the counter and Nicky can see that Roland has swiftly covered all the other patrons so he has some time. “You’re here early. Bad day that you need to drink away?”

Erik choke on the sip he’s taking. Nicky watches the drops on his lip before Erik dries them with a napkin. Damn, it’s been so long since he last got himself laid. He feels very impure, right now.

Aaron and Andrew aren’t even asleep yet. They’re somewhere in the back playing with Jay, an half-Japanese guy of the security who is technically on his day off but love kids so much he stops by every time Nicky brings the twins just to show them how to fold origami flowers and animals. There’s an whole shelf full of those in Nicky’s minuscule apartment, and that’s why his DVDs are in a box under his bed.

Erik has an earring at his left lobe. It’s a cross that Nicky would willingly kiss and it catches the club’s lights as it dangles.

“A good day, actually,” he says, unaware of Nicky’s thoughts. “If we exclude coffee. American coffee is a disgrace. I might convert to tea.”

“Hey, I’ll let you know that disgrace is the only thing keeping me alive, right now.”

Nicky’s week has been full with Angela still sick and he’d had to work on his off day, which had made the twins mad and throw tantrums, which had made Roland call him when he was at Eden, which had make Nicky to drop a shift midway and take another one up tonight to have money for rent. He’s opening up and he’ll have to close up to. Coffee is his saving grace.

Erik raises his hands, laughing as he surrenders, and Nicky wants to kiss him very much. He also should get the kids and bring them upstairs now that there’s not many people, getting them to sleep and turn on the phone Roland gave him when he changed his. It’s programmed to speed call Nicky if the kids say his name, Tilda’s name or “Help”. Nicky’s had a few false alarms, but he’d take them over being negligent in checking in.

“I probably need to get the kids, actually,” he mutters, striving not to feel guilty for interrupting Erik’s flirtatious nature once again. He offers a teasing smile, hoping it doesn’t feel accusing, “I guess you’ll be out dancing with the dude you stole that shirt from?”

Erik brings his drink up to his lips, but smirks. “I think I’ll be here for a while, tonight,” he says. “And I’ll let you know I won this shirt fair and square.”

Nicky laughs as he leaves.

Andrew frowns and stops in his tracks more than usual, but he doesn’t outwardly fight Nicky on wearing his pajamas and going to bed. There’s only one single that he and Aaron have to share, but
they never seem too bothered and Nicky sits on the side of the mattress to read them something.

He has to take one of his two breaks for this, but it’s okay. This never feels tiring.

Andrew stares at the page as Aaron does his best to follow Nicky’s finger and repeat after him. They’re really cute and Nicky loves them lots.

Aaron taps his finger on a picture when they get to the part where it’s revealed that the dragon never kidnapped Kanga, he just wanted her recipe for pancakes, and therefore there was no need for King Pooh to send Knight Piglet to save her. He chuckles a bit.

Andrew looks up to Nicky. “Jay says that it’s true,” he says, non sequitur.

It takes Nicky a moment to understand what he means. When he does, he nods. “I told you. The guy who hurt me will never be allowed back in. It’s a big rule.”

Andrew seems to think it through, then nods. “Roland said so too.”

Nicky wonders if he asked everybody the same question tonight. Or, well, had Aaron ask for him since he doesn’t really talk to other people just yet. Anyway, it’s kinda cute.

Nicky offers him an open palm behind Aaron’s back, and Andrew grabs on his middle finger. “Hey, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was hurt. I didn’t want you two to worry, but it wasn’t the right thing to do, you are right. We should always tell if someone hurts us. I should have told, too. We good?”

Andrew stares at him for a long moment before he nods. The next moment he’s pointing at the pancakes on the page too, hitting them demandingly.

Nicky sighs. “Yes, we can do pancakes for breakfast. Now go to sleep, you little gremlins.”

Aaron pipes up immediately “What’s a gremlin?”

Nicky is very tired.

Erik is still at the counter when Nicky comes back. The guy from the last time is on the stool beside him, or better on the lap of the guy sitting on the stool beside him. They flag him over when they see him come back to the counter.

Nicky takes their orders with a smile and watches as the new couple downs their shots and hits the dance-floor immediately after. Erik doesn’t move to follow.

Nicky thinks, this might be okay. “How do you like disgustingly American breakfast food?”

Erik arches a brow. “I might make a sacrifice for a worthy cause. Why?”

Nicky feels lighter today than he’d felt in more than half a year. “We’re doing pancakes at Sweetie’s tomorrow at nine. Think your college schedule can take it?”

“What’s the point of being a European exchange student if I don’t make the most of my American experience? Give me the address so my GPS can get me lost as I try to get there.”
“Optimist, I like it.” Nicky scribbles the address on a napkin, and adds his number just under it. He says, “In case you get lost.” And winks. It feels a lifetime since he last winked at someone, wow.

Erik’s smile is blinding and Nicky is very gay.

So, Andrew doesn’t like Erik. Okay. Nicky can work with this.

Erik gets Aaron to check out the ice-cream flavors under the excuse that he’s European and needs someone to explain them to him. Aaron’s thirst for knowledge gets him to leave Andrew and Nicky alone at the table.

Nicky sits besides him. “What is wrong?” he asks, and he doesn’t want to let Erik’s sweetness blind him to anything he might do to make the kids uncomfortable. Andrew trusts Nicky, and Nicky is not going to burn that trust for a hot dude. “Has Erik done something?”

Andrew glowers at the man’s back from him seat. “He’s pretty,” he says, as if the fact personally offends him. Nicky’s mouth slams open.

Erik showed up with his long blond hair tied in a bun, with a button-up light green shirt and light blue jeans. Overall, he looked really hot, but it was still weird to have a kid acknowledge that.

Nicky tries to think when he experienced his first crushes and he thinks, yeah, he might have liked to hold hands with boys more than girls in kindergarten already.

Still, Andrew looks pretty upset by the fact that his six years old brain thinks a man is pretty. Nicky is not sure if this is the first developing stage of a gay kid or just admiration, but he’s not going to let Andrew grow with the notion that complimenting other males is wrong.

“Yes, he’s very pretty,” he says. “Isn’t that okay?”

Andrew shrugs. “He’s old.”

Erik is twenty-one. Nicky can see how that would be old in Andrew’s perspective, but it’s also hilarious to hear. “I guess he is, for you.”

Andrew’s eyes flash to Nicky and his frowns deepens. It’s like he heard the, not for me, hidden in the sentence. “You’re a boy too.”

And, here it is. “Yes.”

“You can’t have a boyfriend. You have to have a girlfriend.”

“Not necessarily.” God, how Nicky wishes someone told him this when he was a kid. Slowly, he tries to make it as easy as possible. “Sometimes boys can like other boys. Or like both boys and girls. I don’t like girls, romantically, so I will not have a girlfriend. I have had boyfriends, though, and I might have another, one day. There’s nothing wrong with any of that.”

Andrew blinks. This is the closest thing to outright surprise Nicky has seen on him. He blinks again. “Boys can like boys?” he asks again.

Nicky nods. “Roland has a boyfriend, for example. You can ask him, if you want.”
“And you like boys?”

“Yes,” Nicky laughs, “I like boys very much.”

This time, Andrew’s face smooths out as he whispers a low, "Oh". Nicky loves that softness on him. His cousin looks at peace, somehow.

Andrew looks at Aaron and Erik and nods to himself. “Boys can like boys,” he repeats once again.

Nicky just smiles and takes a sip of his drink to try to hide it, not wanting his cousin to think he’s making fun.

“Your ice-cream flavors makes absolutely no sense to me and I love it,” Erik announces, making known that he and Aaron are coming back to the table. Nicky can see their waitress approaching with their pancakes so their timing is perfect. Aaron takes the seat in front of Andrew but besides Erik, and looks utterly unbothered by it. “Aaron was very helpful, indeed.”

If Aaron was a peacock, he’d be showing off his tail right now. He looks so proud and Andrew looks a bit jealous as he glares at his brother. Nicky remembers when he was ten and had his first crush on a guy he used to see on the bus and who probably went to college already; one of those hopeless Crushes kids always get sooner or later. His little cousin looks well on his way to turn into an adorable baby gay and Nicky couldn’t be prouder.

He’s also very happy he got Andrew away from his parents. He gets a flash of what Luther and Maria would have put Andrew through for calling Erik pretty and he’s suddenly feeling sick.

He leans over to cut Andrew’s share in pieces to hide how he can’t eat his and Erik does the same for Aaron. Andrew looks even more annoyed so Nicky ruffles his hair.

Aaron says Erik never ate double chocolate chips cookie dough ice-cream. Erik says it sounds too sweet for him and just like that Nicky can see the crush dying as Andrew vehemently complains that it’s the best ice-cream ever.

If nothing else, it makes it less weird when Nicky steals a tiny kiss from Erik’s lips as he drops them all off at their place.

Andrew searches Nicky out one day he has his night off and after he theoretically already put them to bed. Nicky just shoots Erik a fast text to ask to postpone their call and sits on the couch with his cousin.

They haven’t meet up with Erik much because Nicky had preferred keeping their dates for the two of them alone, to avoid the twins getting attached in case it didn’t work. It’s only been a month but he thinks he might have to make them meet again, because he can’t imagine not having Erik in his life, somehow.

Erik asks about the twins every now and then and looks delighted by any and all stories of them. Nicky doesn’t have much time for dates, with all he has to do, but they have long night calls after the twins go to bed and somehow it works. Erik also shows up lots at Eden’s, so there’s that.

“What’s up?“ he asks. “Bad dream?“
Andrew shakes his head. He’s dangling his feet off the edge of the couch and he’s frowning, which means it could be anything.

Still, Nicky is not expecting: “I’ll have a boyfriend when I grow up.”

It takes him a moment to tame the overexcited cheers in his brain. He’s still smiling very wide when he nods to his cousin. “That’s wonderful, Andrew. I’m sure your boyfriend will be a lovely person.” Then he thinks back to how young his cousin is and adds, “You know there’s no rush, though, right?”

Andrew rolls his eyes at him. He rolls his eyes! “I’m six,” he says. “I said when I grow up. Like, at fifteen.”

Nicky deserves a prize for managing not to laugh his ass off. Really. He wants to crush his baby gay cousin in a thousand hugs. “Oh, I see. My bad, then. It’s okay, you can have a boyfriend at fifteen.”

Andrew nods. “You can have Erik, then,” he says. “He’ll be too old when I’m fifteen.”

One day, at one family dinner of some kind, Andrew will bring over his boyfriend and Nicky will break out this story like any worthy parent just to embarrass him. And Andrew will probably kill him in his sleep, but it will be, oh, so worth it.

“Thank you, I guess?” He chuckles. “I’m glad you’re okay with me seeing Erik.”

Andrew shrugs. “He won’t be stealing my ice-cream,” he says, with absolute seriousness, like the threat of theft was an important factor to consider in the choice of Nicky’s potential partner. Lovely, really. Nicky can always count on Andrew’s sweet tooth.

Still, he offers his open hand to Andrew, and his cousin grabs on his middle finger without hesitation. “He won’t,” Nicky promises. “I wouldn’t let him.”

Andrew hums something as he plays with Nicky’s fingers. After a while, simply, he hops off the couch and runs off to bed. Nicky watches him go and knows he’ll have the full afternoon plus lunch and dinner at Sweetie’s and a shift at Eden’s, tomorrow, but he won’t be able to sleep any now.

When he calls Erik, he’s beaming. “Would you like to stop by Sweetie’s and have dinner with me and the twins, tomorrow?”

It feels like things are working out, finally.
When he took them both in, Nicky had just assumed Andrew was shy. It was a logic conclusion for a kid that didn’t speak and rarely initiated any kind of interaction with anyone except his brother.

Almost a full year in, though, Nicky has to change his mind. Andrew is touchy. He’s just very picky about who he deems worthy of his affection, just as he is with all his snacks and his ice-creams and his plushes.

As the twins approach seven far too fast for Nicky’s brain to comprehend, Andrew decides that Nicky is not only safe but his. And showing so implies, in Andrew Speak, lots of physical touch. Nicky could be cooking and suddenly find himself with a kid attached to his leg, koala-style. Or he might be reading to Aaron on the floor and feel Andrew wriggle himself against his back or side to curl down and take a nap. Erik’s presence at the house happens more often than not, just like Nicky finding himself with a lapful of kid well past bedtime as he and his boyfriend try to watch a movie on the couch.

He won’t lie, after spending the first three months half convinced Andrew hated him, he is ready to burst out with happiness at the development.

Also, much like everything else, Aaron has a tendency to either copy or try to one-up his brother in anything he does, so Nicky has found himself in the middle of a squabble more than once.

School started with the expected bumps along the road. Andrew was an indifferent asshole, Aaron was a sassy asshole, and Nicky had met the principal in his office before the first week was even over. Talking about good beginnings. Erik bought them all take-out tacos to try and lift the morale after Nicky had to try and deliver his first I’m disappointed speech. Which didn’t go well at all, because neither of the kids fell for it.

After that, though, and a long discussion of what made the kids uncomfortable, why, and how to ask other kids not to do it, things seemed to go a bit better. Aaron was eventually won over by the science books and promises of collecting leaves and growing plants, while Andrew started to hide himself in Nicky’s room to steal his picture-less books and practice his reading.

And then, the unthinkable happens.

Nicky doesn’t immediately register. It’s been just another shitty day and he’s cooking Mexican food for lunch to keep up his own morale, so he has to make sure the things he uses for cooking the adults’ stuff don’t touch the kids’. The twins are highly affronted by spicy food and there is no need for a repeat of last time’s three hours of crying.

It takes the muffled sounds of slammed things to make him look up from the stove.

Roland shows up on the kitchen door immediately after and with an apologetic expression. “We have a situation,” he claims, and for a moment Nicky fears all kinds of worst. “The twins were in a fight.”

Which doesn’t mean it’s not a bad thing, really, just that it’s such an ingrained part of their routine that Nicky only sighs heavily. He will get white hair prematurely, this way. He takes a deep breath. “With whom?”
Roland makes a face. “That’s the situation: with each other.”


Roland nods, and to his credit doesn’t roll his eyes to Nicky’s obvious freak-out. “I didn’t know what to do with them. They refused to talk to each other the whole ride home, they watched out of the windows and wouldn’t even hold my hands. The teacher said they had to be separated because they kept trying to ruin each other’s notebooks.”

*Holy shit. That looks serious. That looks far too serious for two kids, what the heck, Nicky never planned for a Twinyard War!*

“Okay,” he lies, mostly to himself. “Okay, uh… What about you, uh, take some food for you and your boyfriend? Meanwhile, I’ll… just… try to fix that. Yeah.”

Roland’s eyebrow arches delicately. “You sure you don’t need me any longer? I can call and say I’ll be late.”

Tempting offer, very much so, but Roland has been staying overtime — unpaid, bless his heart, because Nicky couldn’t afford any more — to help the kids study as Nicky ran all over the place after the mess at Sweetie’s. Angela was caught dealing drugs to the clients and, though he had nothing to do with that, Nicky had to leave the place as fast as he could and find another job to avoid having the twins taken by the social services.

Currently, it seems that nobody has a spot open for a gay guy of barely twenty, with no college degree but a set of twins to look after.

Nicky keeps budgeting and re-budgeting, but there’s no getting around the fact that all the shifts at Eden’s wouldn’t give him the money to raise two kids and pay for rent and food and bills. If he doesn’t find anything soon, he’ll have to cave and accept Erik’s help, which has been offered and refused too many times already, at the price of many fights.

Nicky just can’t let Erik get tangled into this. It’s his family, his problems, and Erik should be free to walk away whenever he wants, not feeling like he has to provide for children who aren’t even related to him in any way. They have been in a relationship for barely three months and Nicky hadn’t even allowed him to sleep over yet.

*Stop. Not now. Focus.*

Right, the twins.

He forces himself to smile to Roland, who’s staring at him with a worried frown. Jesus, he doesn’t even look nineteen. “Nah, I’ve got it. Just go and take a break, okay? And be careful.”

If Roland rolls his eyes at the over-care, Nicky elects to ignore it. Instead, he marches out of the kitchen and to the twins’ room to try and figure out what nuclear bomb exploded there.

It’s worse than he’d expected, because he comes to the room to find Aaron sitting on the floor, facing a corner and with a book on his lap as he reads under his breath, while Andrew is sitting on the floor on the very other side of the room, keeping the twin beds between himself and his brother, and is staring out of the window. *Shit.*

Andrew ignores him. Great. Aaron turns just to glare at his attempt. “Drew is being a meanie and I hate him!”

“Hey, no, we don’t use those words, okay? We don’t tell our family we hate them,” which is the biggest hypocrisy he’s ever told ever since he took the kids in, holy shit, wow. He’s a disaster alright. “Why would you say that?”

Walking closer to the beds, though keeping in the middle because right now showing any kind of favoritism would make the whole thing worse, Nicky can notice Aaron is sniffing. Immediately as he gets to the beds, the twin abandons his book to climb on his mattress and point an accusing finger to his brother. “He pushed Kat away!”

Nicky has no idea who Kat is, but this sounds like an old story he was really hoping he could consider closed. He turns to the window, just to find that Andrew has turned lazily to them and is now glaring to his brother. A true glare, a mean one, not the default glare of when he’s just thinking.

Not good. “Andrew, is it true?”

Andrew’s eyes raise to Nicky’s with defiance. “She wasn’t part of the promise. He broke it.”

Nicky frowned. Promise?

Aaron grabbed his pillow, just to slam it on the bed. “This is not fair! I like Kat! I like to play with Kat! You can’t send her away!”

“And you can’t break your promise!” Andrew yells back, voice rising as his brother’s does.

“It was a dumb promise anyway!”

“’t was not dumb!”

“Was too!”

“Was not!”

“Was too!”

“Was—“

“Alright, that’s enough!” Nicky doesn’t yell, just because he’s conditioned not to by now. The twins’ knee-jerk reaction to adults yelling is to hide somewhere for hours on end and Nicky’s gotten too many heart attacks already from the days with the divorcing couple of neighbors. But he keeps his voice firm when he levels both kids with a serious look. “Andrew, can you come on the bed too? We’re going to talk this out quietly.”

Aaron scoffs but falls back to sit on his heels and hugs his pillow to the chest. Andrew glares and glares some more before finally complying and getting on his own bed.

The beds used to have a space of a foot or some between them when they moved in, but the twins kept slipping into each other’s because they couldn’t stand the distance, so Nicky pushed them close to make a double-sized. He can’t believe the difference, right now.

“Okay,” he starts, taking his socks off to sit legs crossed at the end of the mattresses. “Let’s start from the beginning. Who is Kat?”
Andrew’s scowl worsens. “Classmate,” he mutters. “She’s annoying.”

“She’s not!”

“Andrew, be nice.” Nicky can feel the migraine growing, oh, he can feel it well. “So, she’s a classmate of yours. And Aaron, you like playing with Kat?”

Aaron is not a social kid. Up until now, he’d seemed content just following and imitating Andrew. Now, though, he nods shyly. He seems to hesitate a moment, considering Nicky in his full height, before muttering, “She helps me with math when the teacher isn’t looking.”

Adorable, Nicky would swear. “That’s great, Aaron. I’m happy you found a new friend.” Carefully, he turns to Andrew. “Why would you push her? Aaron likes her. You should be nice with your brother’s friends.”

Again, Andrew glares. “No.”

Not a temper tantrum, please, not a temper tantrum. “Andrew, that’s not right. How would you feel if Aaron were to push your friends, uh?”

Andrew barely blinks. “No.”

Before Nicky can react, Aaron jumps on his feet on the bed. “You don’t care because you don’t even have any friends! Because you’re mean and weird!”

“Aaron!” Nicky tries to grab him, but Aaron’s faster and runs off the bed and out of the room.

“Aaron, come back here! Aaron!”

New architectural rule: door handles should be placed high enough that upset six years old can’t reach them. But it’s clear that whoever built his door didn’t have kids quite like the twins.

Nicky’s heart skips a beat as he skids on the floor, bare-foot, and sees Aaron open the door that Roland didn’t lock when he left. He’s got visions, in a fraction of a second, of Aaron getting outside, maybe downstairs, maybe in the street and what if he gets driven over or maybe kidnapped by some creep or maybe he gets lost and Nicky can’t find him anywhere and—

“Oh!” Erik says, calm and collected as if he wasn’t just met with a door slammed open and a kid launched straight into his legs. Actually, he just picks Aaron up as if nothing and looks surprised when he notices his distress. “Woah. Am I that late for lunch?”

Nicky could kiss him. He could kiss him any day, any time, but especially right now. Erik, unaware, walks in and closes the door behind himself. Aaron stays dazed just for a moment more before he starts yelling and trashing in the hold.

Thank fuck, Nicky manages not to say out loud. Instead, he holds his arms out as he approaches and Erik meekly hands the kid over. “Alright, okay, okay—“ Maybe he’s not there yet, his heart’s beating too fast. “I can— I swear I can take it from here, I promise, just— Aaron, stop trashing, would you?! ”

Erik looks at them for a second, watches Nicky getting his nose almost broken by a flying elbow, and then nods. “I’ll go say hi to Andrew, yes? Is he in their room?”

Nicky barely manages to answer, too busy wrestling with a demonic kid, and when he finally manages to sit on the couch with Aaron held flushed against his chest, adult arms wrapped around his body to keep him still, the living room is empty. Nicky can’t see his face, as he’s turned to the
TV, but he feels the remnant attempts at slipping away getting weaker and weaker until all that’s left are the shakes from withheld sobs.

Okay. Nicky can’t do this, but he’ll have to anyway.

He calls Aaron name slowly. Aaron wriggles some more. Nicky can keep him still with a single arm, so he moves the other to the top of his head, gently caressing the hair there. Aaron stills, screeches and then, finally, bursts out crying.

“Alright, buddy, let it out,” Nicky mutters, knowing better than to try and shush a kid in such anguish. “Cry all you need and then we can talk some more, no running away this time.”

Aaron cries until he’s spent, which means less than five minutes, luckily. When he seems done, Nicky represses a mental sigh and uses his own sleeve to wipe his face from the snot. *Ugh.* “You ready to talk to me?”

“I want friends!” Aaron sobs, waterworks opening once again. “But Andrew scares everybody away and now they all hate me!”

“Oh, bud, I’m sure they don’t hate you. Kat can’t hate you, right? She helps you out.”

“But Andrew pushed her and now she won’t want to talk to me anymore!”

“You can’t know that. And if she’s smart enough to know math, I’m sure she’s smart enough not to blame you for something your brother did, okay? What do you think?” Aaron sniffs. It’s not an answer, but Nicky will take the lack of utter denial as a reluctant assent. Now, “Aaron? What is this promise Andrew was talking about, before?”

This time, Nicky can feel Aaron stiffening in his arms. He tries to maneuver the kid in his lap so he’s sitting sideways and they can look at each others in the face. There’s some more snot to clean away and, oh, this shirt is so going to the laundry basket as soon as he’s defused the situation, alright.

He tries again. “Aaron, we talked about keeping secrets, remember? You shouldn’t keep things that scare or hurt you from me. I promise I won’t get mad, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Even red-rimmed as they are, Aaron has the audacity to roll his eyes, as if the idea of Nicky getting mad is too far fetched for even his six-year-old brain to believe. Nicky can’t find it in himself to be offended. “’t’s an old thing. ’bout mom.”

*Oh. Okay, this is bad. This is a hundred percent surely bad.* “What exactly?”

“Drew and I promised to be together forever. ‘gainst the world or whatever.” Aaron mutters the words as if they’re not a big deal, as if eternity was just a given thing when it came to him and his brother. Nicky thinks that they had to be, what?, four or five?, when they made such a promise. It blows his mind, the unbreakable devotion in that simple thing. “He says Kat’s gonna be like mom.”

Nicky knows there’s no way a six year old is as abusive as the twins’ mom, but the words still send a chill down his spine. It takes him a bit to place his thoughts in a coherent stream again. “I see. So, Andrew is afraid Kat will hurt you?”

“No, he’s— He’s just— He’s a meanie!”

Nicky arches a brow before he can stop himself. “Buddy, Andrew is in the wrong when he pushes
Kat, but you and I both know so are you when you call him names. And say mean things about him, like that he’s weird. That was really rude, you know.”

Luckily, Aaron blushes and looks appropriately chastised, because Nicky wouldn’t have known how to send the message across otherwise. As it is, he says, “I’ll talk to him, okay? We’ll solve this.”

Aaron nods, then shakes some more as his body tries to stop crying, and Nicky hugs him thigh.

He remembers when the twins were born. When Luther told him, and then said he was not allowed to ever meet them. Why?, he’d asked, and his father had looked at him with disgust written all over his face. You know why, Nicholas, his mother had piped in, voice strained, until you’re healed, we can’t risk you hurting or corrupting the kids. They already were so unlucky to be born as it is.

Yeah, that had been a shitty week.

Now, he hugs Aaron and draws circles on his back to calm him down and mulls it for a while longer before adding a post-it to his speech. “You know, buddy, I’m an only child, so I don’t really know how it feels to have a sibling, but-” no, fuck, Nicky, not crying right now! “-but sometimes when I was really, really sad, and there was nobody there for me, I really wished I had a big brother who’d look out for me, you know?”

Aaron doesn’t answer for a long while and Nicky lets him, because this isn’t really something that’s supposed to be realized in five minutes. Instead, he smiles as he dries wet cheeks once again. “Enough crying, now, it’s time for lunch. We didn’t invite Erik over to let him starve, did we?”

He sends Aaron to wash his face mostly because he needs a moment to exhale and think the whole mess over.

So, Andrew doesn’t trust the girl around Aaron. Andrew thinks their promise means the two of them against the world or something and nobody else is allowed in. Nicky promised to solve this.

Fucking great idea, you dumbass.

No time to regret, though, because Erik is alone with Andrew and Nicky is ninety-nine percent sure the only reason there hasn’t been any more yelling is because Andrew still has some kind of quite-crush going, despite the ice-cream disappointment of a few months ago.

Nicky is almost walking in when he hears laughter from the door. Laughter. And not any laughter, Andrew’s laughter.

What the fuck. What the fuck, it took him eight months to get Andrew to laugh with him!

“It’s true,” Erik says now and Nicky should probably not eavesdrop but Nicky is also absolutely going to eavesdrop. “I love my sister, so of course I get jealous when she talks about her school friends endlessly. Especially now that I’m so far away, it’s easy to worry that she might forget about me and just find someone else to be best friends with in Germany. It happens all the time, Andrew, I promise. But the thing is, a friend is something and a sibling is another. Aaron will find other friends, as he should because we’re all humans and we need many other people with us to be happy. But you’re always going to be his brother, and there’s no substituting you. And he’ll always be yours. And both of you will always know that if something ever happens, even if everyone else in the world turns their back on you, you’ll have each others to count on. How does that sound?”

“Complicated,” Andrew mutters from inside, probably just to be contrary because he’s just that
much of a little shit. Which is a term of endearment, of course. “I still don’t like Kat.”

“And that’s fine,” Erik says. “You don’t have to like her. Just because you and Aaron are twins, it
doesn’t mean you have to like the same things and the same people. You just have to trust your
brother to tell you if he ever needs your help. And I know he will because he did when he got his
plush stuck in the jungle gym, didn’t he? He told you. Not even Nicky, you.”

Okay, this sounds like enough and Nicky needs to physically restrain himself from crying as he
knocks on the frame of the door.

Immediately, both the blond adult and the blond kid look up to him, and Nicky indulges himself for
a second in a fantasy where Erik is the twin’s father and they never had to go through all the shit
that happened. He smiles. “Can we talk this through some more with our bellies full?”

Erik laughs, and standing he ruffles Andrew’s hair with a hand. Nicky can see his kid blushing red
in the cheeks and almost coos at the sight. “Sounds like a good idea. Shall we go?”

That’s not to say all is solved, but Aaron mutters a low apology for his words and Andrew mutters
his own, though Nicky doesn’t miss how he doesn’t specify what exactly he is sorry about. He’ll
take his victories where he gets them, though.

They eat and play games and all it takes is Nicky and Erik teaming up in a savage game of tag for
the twins to fall back into a unite force once again, so all is more or less well.

Nicky watches Erik blowing a raspberry into Aaron’s stomach and Andrew jumping on his back to
force him to release the prisoner and he thinks, okay, maybe it is fixed.

Then Erik has to open his mouth when he’s getting ready to leave, deep in the afternoon before
Nicky has to prepare the kids and head over to Eden’s.

“Why don’t you invite Kat for a playdate?” he says, like it’s all that fucking easy.

Andrew’s good mood sours immediately, Aaron’s eyes widens as if he’s suddenly faced with the
gingerbread house of the witch who eats children and Nicky can feel his blood freeze in his veins
at all the possible scenarios.

Erik blinks at the sudden coldness. “Or not? I guess?”

Nicky wishes he could say no, but his brain already registered it and he knows, deep inside, under
layers of denial, that this could be the only responsible plan.

And, Jesus, how he hates being a responsible adult.

Kat, actually Katelyn, is a lovely girl with blond hair pulled in ponytails and a huge smile with a
missing front tooth. She’s the poster child of every TV spot which contains a perfect family and
Nicky is in adoration of her blue salopette with a rainbow on the front and for how she’s almost
twice as tall as the twins despite being the same age.
Her mom is also the sweetest thing and she doesn’t even blink when Nicky corrects her, he’s not Mr. Minyard actually, he’s Hemmick, not even Mr. Hemmick, actually just Nicky is fine, he’s not really fond of his own family name anyway. She just nods and smiles and asks him to call her Abby.

“Abby, then. Well, I’m really sorry for Andrew’s behavior,” Nicky begins, far too conscious about how Andrew’s hand is pulling in his grip, trying to get away. He keeps it, though he tries not to hold too tight. “I’ve been told he apologized in class?”

“He did,” Abby nods, still smiling. “It’s quite alright. I bet twins bring siblings jealousy to an whole different level, don’t they?”

*If only you knew.* “Yeah, well, I just wanted to apologize too. And maybe invite Katelyn over one afternoon? Aaron says she’s his saving grace when it comes to math and I guess I owe her at least an ice-cream for helping him out.”

Abby laughs, a kind laughter that makes Nicky’s tense shoulders drop a bit, and she keeps smiling as she looks down at her daughter, distracting her from the deep discussion she’d been in with Aaron, on Nicky’s other side from his brother. “What do you say, girl?” she asks, “Want to go over at Aaron’s place sometimes?”

Katelyn lights up like she’s just been given the greatest gift. Nicky is pretty sure everybody in the school courtyard hears her “Yes!”

“Alright,” Abby cheers. Nicky already loves her. “When were you thinking about doing it?”

Nicky can’t exactly tell her he’s free every day until he hears back from one of the twenty places he applied to. “Tomorrow afternoon, maybe?”

Abby tilts her head to the side. “Tomorrow,” she says, frowning. “Is that not a good day? We can do another time, of course,” Nicky hurries to say, but Abby just shakes her head.

“Oh no, that’s not it, I was just trying to juggle things around mentally.” She bites her lower lip, looking a bit embarrassed. “Actually, I really hope I’m not overstepping my boundaries, here, but I’m a bit in a pinch. Katelyn’s step-brother doesn’t have practice tomorrow and I’m on shift at the clinic. My husband was supposed to come pick them both up but he’ll have to take time off from his coffee shop and they’re waiting for a delivery, so he’s a bit struggling too. I understand and, please, don’t hesitate in telling me off if it’s too much of a bother, but would it be a problem if my other kid were to come over too? It’s okay if he can’t! I understand! It was just—“

“Oh, no, it’s not a problem!” Nicky hurries to say, before he remembers what kind of kids he actually has. *Damn.* “I guess? Guys?”

Aaron is just too enthusiast and he keeps nodding. Andrew tilts his head to a side with his thinking frown. “Kevin,” he says, monotone.

“Oh, yes, his name is Kevin,” Abby says, looking pleasantly surprised. “You know him? He’s a bit older than you three.”

Andrew’s face goes slack. Nicky readies himself for the explosion, but gets surprised when all the kid does is nodding. “He can come.”

Woah. Who is this kid who got Andrew’s approval? What the fuck.
“Great!” Abby smiles, almost like she found perfectly normal that Nicky left the decision over to his kid. “Thank you so much, guys, you really saved me there.”

Nicky forgot he was included in the conversation, for a moment. “Uh? Oh, right! Of course! It’s no big deal!”

Abby and Katelyn leave while waving at them politely and Nicky holds on the twins’ hands and thinks, please, Lord, don’t fuck me over now.

Kevin is... intense. Nicky never expected to say it about another kid after living with Andrew and Aaron, but, damn, the child is probably just a shrunken up adult. It’s the only logic explanation because what kid on Earth would turn down ice-cream for a fruit bowl because of nutritional values? Dude, Nicky is an adult and he has no idea what this mini-person is talking about.

Aaron and Katelyn seem happy to share a bowl of cheesecake ice-cream, at least, and coloring a book on the carpet in the living room, so they’re well.

Kevin was all set once Nicky gave him permission to watch the game of Exy running on TV. All it takes to keep him entertained is a question every now and then and the kid can talk for full hours, he’s a true sport fanatic. Nicky admits that’s kind of endearing.

The only problem, really, is Andrew. He keeps staring at Kevin and Nicky would swear he has not blinked once ever since the kid arrived. He hates to use the same word Aaron did in his tantrum, but that really is weird.

“All right, Andrew, can you help me get the empty bowls to the kitchen?” It’s a weak excuse, he knows, but Andrew is smart and knows Nicky well enough to recognize his tactic of getting a one-on-one talk, so he obeys meekly.

Aaron gives him a look, almost worried, but Andrew passes him by and he goes back to coloring. Kevin looks down at him and his sister with some kind of longing, and Nicky wonders how long before he asks to be included.

In the kitchen, he lifts Andrew to sit on the table top before he takes a chair for himself. He noticed Andrew doesn’t deal well with being boxed in and he actually seems more relaxed when he has an advantaged position to his interlocutor. “What’s going on?”

Andrew outstretches his hand and Nicky obliges him, offering his open palm so he can snatch the middle finger and play with it. And doesn’t that say something about the little shit’s personality. “Kevin’s wrist is broken.”

Nicky noticed. Even if Kevin hadn’t told them about it, it would be kinda hard to miss the cast around the kid’s left wrist. It looked new, if nothing else because it was still pristine white and empty of the drawings and names kids usually cover those things with. “Yeah, he got hurt playing Exy, remember that he told us?”

And speaking of, what parent lets a kid so little play such a violent sport? What if he got hurt in the head? Nicky has been on the receiving end of too many unwarranted judgements to start doing the same to other people, but, damn, that sport was fucking dangerous for adults too! Abby sounded so sweet, though, so—
“He didn’t.”

Nicky blinked. Fucking, “what?”

Andrew was frowning harder now, staring at Nicky’s finger and nothing else. “He lied. I saw it from the window. Riko did it, but the teacher didn’t listen to me.”

Nicky feels blown away. “Who is Riko?”

“Kevin’s best friend. They were playing Exy in the courtyard at recess. Riko got mad and pushed Kevin down, then he hit him with his racquet.”

Oh, shit. Why did all these things happen all to Nicky, sweet mother of—Oh, come on, no. “Why didn’t you tell anyone? When did it happen?”

“Eight days ago,” Andrew says, and then shrugs. “I told the teacher but Kevin said Riko hit him while they were playing Exy and that it was an accident.”

Nicky’s brain is fried now, and all he can think is a buzzing static. “And you’re a hundred percent sure that’s now what happened? Couldn’t it be you didn’t see well?”

This time, Andrew looks up from Nicky’s fingers and actually lets them go. “No,” he says, cold. “Riko hit him on purpose. He was trying to hit him in the face but Kevin covered up like this,—”

Nicky watches, abashed, as Andrew uses both arms to shield his face. “—and he hurt his arm instead.”

What. The. Fuck. That’s a psycho thing to do, what the fuck. What the fuck. “Why would Kevin cover him up?”

“Kevin’s scared of Riko. Jean too.”

“Wait, who is Jean?”

“Kevin’s other best friend,” Andrew huffs, clearly getting impatient. “Riko always hits him because he gets mad that he doesn’t understand French.” He frowns. “Jean doesn’t know English very well, he’s adopted. He’s from France so he speaks that sometimes.”

“And Riko—” Nicky can’t believe what he himself is saying, “—doesn’t like that he speaks French? So he hits him?”

Andrew nods. “He kicks him in the legs and then says he got hurt at Exy practice and everybody believes him.”

Jesus Christ. What kind of fucking sociopath in the making is this kid? Holy— “Andrew, did Riko ever hurt you or Aaron? Did he try to?”

“He wanted me to play with them at recess once but I told him no,” Andrew says. “I don’t like him.”

And thank fuck for that.

Nicky stands up and bends forward to kiss Andrew on the forehead. It’s not an usual gesture, so he moves slowly and clearly, letting his motions be telegraphed so that his cousin always knows what’s going to happen. Andrew stiffens, but lets it happen.

Nicky’s lips brush his hair and then he pulls back. He almost cries at the surprised expression on
the kid’s face. “You did well, Andrew. You did very, very well. Both in saying no to him and in telling me the truth. If anything like that ever happens again, you come and tell me immediately, okay?”

Still a bit dazed, Andrew nods. Nicky helps him off the table and hurries him back to the living room. His heartbeat still hasn’t recovered.

What should he— No, that’s a dumb question, he knows what he should do. It’s just going to be an heck of an awful conversation, damn.

He pulls his phone out of a pocket, and from another the note Abby left him when they met in the morning bringing the kids to school. He almost punches the digits in before bringing the device to his ear. He just hopes this won’t ruin Aaron’s chances at a friendship with Katelyn.

“Wild Fox Café, how may I help you?”

“Hello, I am Nicholas Hemmick, am I speaking with Mr. Wymack? It’s about Kevin."

David Wymack, owner of the café known as the Wild Fox, is a bulk of man in his forties, with a dirty mouth and a piercing glare. He shows up at Nicky’s door frowning, though he can’t really be faulted for that when he was called to his kids’ playdate three hours earlier than planned. Abby had jokingly granted that her husband was actually some kind of golden hearted labrador in human shape but it is hard to tell from underneath the old wife-beater he’s wearing and the tribal flames tattooed all over his arms.

Nicky really hopes this doesn’t end in a brawl because he already knows who’d be losing.

Spoiler alert, it’s his sorry ass.

After Kevin and Katelyn have rejoiced at the sight of their father — and step-father, respectively — and showed him the results of their hour of playdate, Nicky has managed to get them back to play and find some semblance of privacy in the kitchen where he proceeded on repeating word for word what Andrew told him. Wymack started the talk on his feet, arms crossed, and ended it on a chair, pale faced and stiff.

“I understand that you don’t even know me or my kids, I really do,” Nicky hurries in saying, terrified by what overlooking this situation might turn it into. “I can just promise you, Andrew despises lies with all his being. He’s basically allergic to them, I swear, and he much prefers keeping silent, to be honest. I thought it was just better to call you as soon as he told me.”

Wymack passes a hand through his hair and looks suddenly less intimidating and a bit older. “Did Kevin say anything?”

Nicky shakes his head. “I didn’t talk to him. I didn’t think he would tell a stranger, if he’s lied up until now to all his teachers and you.”

It’s another silent five minutes before Wymack stands without a word. He goes to the living room and asks, a bit gruffly, for Kevin and Andrew to come to the kitchen.

Aaron is the first to move and Nicky is not surprised to see it is to grab onto his brother’s arm, even though he’s looking up at Wymack with fear clear in his eyes. “Why?!” he asks, panicked.
“Aaron, it’s okay,” Nicky whispers, kneeling in front of the twins. They seem to relax when Wymack’s sight gets hidden. Kevin just obediently goes to his father. “We just need to talk to Andrew and Kevin for a moment, okay? We’ll be back soon.”

Aaron looks dubiously at his brother, then back to his cousin. “You’ll be there the whole time?”

“I promise I will.”

Maybe Aaron doesn’t have his brother’s fixation with deals and promises, but he looks relieved by the words and he lets go.

It’s a difficult talk that Nicky weathers through with Andrew firmly in his lap, from the moment when Wymack asks him to repeat what he saw to when Kevin panics and starts yelling he’s liar to when the poor kid collapses on the floor sobbing and screaming he’s afraid because Riko said he’d break his leg next if he tells anyone. He’s, what, two years older than the twins?, three? He’s not even ten.

Nicky wants to puke, but holds Andrew closer instead, as they watch Wymack hug Kevin in his lap, promising safety in his ears.

Andrew turns his face to hide in Nicky’s neck. He’s gone back to scarce words and non-verbal gestures ever since Wymack approached him, and getting the story out of him has been a long and difficult process that left both him and Nicky exhausted. Now, he mutters, “ice-cream.”

Nicky chuckles a bit. “You already had that, buddy. What about some warm milk, instead?”

“Don’t like it.”

“It will make you grow taller.”

“… A bit.” Gotcha.

Wymack collects Kevin and Katelyn and says he’s going to call his wife first and the school later. With Kevin talking, Andrew won’t need to come forward as witness, which is good because Nicky doubts he would speak in front of so many people.

When Nicky accompanies them to the door, Andrew still holding onto him like a koala with face buried in his neck, Wymack tilts his head at them. “Thank you,” he says, voice gruff but sincere.

Nicky just nods. “Let me know if you need anything,” he says, as if he actually has some kind of helping this man. He only gets a gesture as answer, but that’s enough.

The twins don’t ask to sleep with him, ever, so Nicky sits on the couch instead, calls Erik and bails his eyes out. Why do all these ugly things happen to kids?

Erik tries to soothe him, and when he fails he sneaks out of his college, drives over and ends up curled on the couch with Nicky crying in his chest.
A full week later, Nicky gets a call from Abby. She starts crying somewhere during her thanking speech that Nicky tries desperately to turn down, and she ends up inviting him and the twins at her husband’s café for breakfast and an update.

So Nicky prepares the twins and they drive to the Wild Fox with only Aaron breaking the silence with an endless stream of chatter about this thing Katelyn taught him. Andrew takes Nicky’s middle finger when they get out of the car.

The Wild Fox is full of obnoxious orange, which the twins don’t seem to appreciate, and fox-themed stuff, from the paw-prints along the counter to the fox faces on the paper cups. The kids get a huge cookie each and some orange juice, so Nicky gets himself the biggest coffee he can and says he’s not hungry because he still hasn’t found a second job.

The place is full of kids age high-school and college despairing over their homework, so Abby leads them to a mostly secluded table where Wymack is already sat overseeing his kids working together on a stack of paper. It takes just as little to get Aaron invested in what Katelyn is doing as it takes Kevin to lose interest in it to stare at Andrew instead.

With no prompting needed, he mutters, “I’m sorry I called you a liar even if you were telling the truth.”

Andrew just stares at him, but he’s still got Nicky’s finger in his hand and he clenches his grip around it when the words reach him. It’s a good reaction, probably.

“So,” Nicky hesitates, stealing glances at Aaron and Katelyn. “What is going to happen, now?”

Wymack sighs heavily. “We pressed charges,” he says. “Bullying, but it might get bigger later on.”

“Kevin and Jean brought us to this place behind the Exy court, in the woods,” Abby adds in a low voice. “Riko killed a couple cats there. He’s going to have to go through a psych evaluation and there’s a chance he might get diagnosed with sociopathy. A friend of mine from college is a psychotherapist and she told me animal abuse might be a step into a worsening of the condition.”

“Jesus,” Nicky can’t stop himself from saying. This is crazy. The kid is Kevin’s age, for fuck’s sake. “So, Jean spoke up too?”

“His older sister works here part-time,” Wymack says, pointing to the kind barista with rainbow hair that served them. “Renee’s a martial art champion and a saint at heart. When I told her what came up, she talked to her brother and he spilled everything as soon as she promised to protect him. Riko had told him he’d be shipped back to France if he complained and let’s just say his life here was not good.”

“The police told us they broke into Riko’s house and it seems his current guardian, his uncle, is pretty unstable too.” Abby sighs, pressing a hand to her forehead. “The evidence seems to prove he was highly abusive of his nephew, so that might be what gave the start to his behavior.”

“That’s absurd.” It’s not. Nicky’s seen how cruel people can be, he’s been through it himself. He touches his own arm, where under the cloth of his sleeve rest the scars from the electroconvulsive therapy. “Well, I’m glad it’s over?”

Wymack snorts. “Probably just started, but whatever. As long as it keeps my kids safe.”
Which is more than most parents Nicky has known his whole life. He wonders if really all the Tilda’s, the Luther’s, the Riko’s uncles of this world are just the minority. It’s hard to believe, from his prospective.

Andrew tugs on Nicky’s sleeve. “Martial arts,” he just says, but the frown on his face is his confused one.

Honestly, this kid is going to end up all wrinkled and twenty-five, Nicky knows it. “It’s a fighting style. Kinda. Probably.”

Oh, yes, Nicky doesn’t like the twinkle in Andrew’s eyes, at all. The kid’s already enough of a menace as it is.

“Let’s switch to lighter subjects, yes?” Abby cuts in, clapping her hands once. “Nicky! What is your story, darling?”

Nicky almost laughs in her face. Lighter subjects. As if.

“Uh, there’s not much to say, really,” he tries.

“Nicky’s our cousin,” Aaron pipes in, turned to Katelyn but loud enough that the whole table turns to him. “We live with him now. He cooks Mexican food but doesn’t put the burning stuff in it, it’s good.”

Katelyn tilts her head to the side, confused. “What about your mommy and daddy?”

Aaron shrugs before Nicky can jump in. “Dunno dad. Mom died.” He darkens, as always when speaking about Tilda, and looks back down to his coloring. “She wasn’t like your mom, though.”

“Of course she wasn’t,” Kevin frowns. “Her mom’s her mom, and your mom’s your mom. They’re not the same mom.”

“I know that!” Aaron hisses. “I just meant that our mom didn’t like us.”

And the lighter subject has been breached. Nicky hopes Abby doesn’t feel too bad about it.

“Aaron, why don’t you show Katelyn that homework you couldn’t finish? Maybe she can help you?”

Fast, Aaron whips out his notebook and Katelyn looks eager to offer her help. Kevin ends up trying to slip in and teach them both and Andrew looks on, bored. Soon enough, Kevin turns to him and tries to get him into accepting to play Exy with him, which Andrew looks extremely annoyed about.

Wymack gives it just long enough for the kids to be too busy to bother with the adults, before his eyes drill holes into Nicky. “You taking care of the lads alone?”

Nicky gulps, because there’s dark steel in that voice. “Uh, yes, sir,” it comes out instinctively.

An arched brow. “What about your family?”

“Not in the picture, sir,” why can’t he stop calling him sir?! “My parents cut all ties when I stopped going to gay-to-straight conversion therapy and I only heard back from them when my aunt overdosed and left the twins alone. They weren’t going to take them in, so I did.”

“That’s horrible, Nicky,” Abby said, sincere. She outstretched a hand to touch his arm. “I’m so sorry they did that to you, but I hope you know you’re really brave.”
“Thank you.” I’m not. I’m so not, can’t you tell I’m terrified? “I’m trying.”

“Do you have a job, kid?” Nicky blinks at Wymack. “Don’t look at me like that. You gonna call me sir, I’m gonna call you kid. How old are you, even? Twenty-three?”

“Twenty-one,” Nicky replies instinctively, and then realizes it might have not been the best answer because Abby looks ready to faint and Wymack’s scowl deepens even more. “I do have a job,” he feels in need to precise. “I work as a bartender at Eden’s Twilight.”

“That’s a night club,” Wymack says. “How do you do with the kids?”

By the time the twins finish their cookies and start reclaiming his attention again, Nicky has been thoroughly grilled. Wymack demanded to know about every arrangements he ever did for the twins, from where they slept when he was on duty to how much the rent for his apartment was. He looked darker by the second and Nicky feels terribly like he just failed a test.

“One job can’t pay enough,” the man says, waving with a hand to the counter.

Only now, Nicky notices they’ve been here long enough that the crowd has dispersed. They’ll probably come back for lunch time, but now the coffee shop is pleasantly quiet, and the nice barista Renee can afford to reach them at the table. “Yes, boss?”

“Don’t put on the hiring sign,” Wymack tells her, pointing roughly at Nicky. “I got you new helping hands already.”

Nicky, for himself, blinks a couple times before it all registers in his brain. “What?!”

Abby giggles, even if her husband looks at him like he’s an idiot. “I’m hiring you, brat. You said you can work a coffee machine, right?”

“Uh, yeah, but—“

“No buts. I’m the boss, I make the rules, I take the decisions.” Wymack stands up with a huff. “And I decide to hire you. You working at Eden’s tonight?” Nicky shakes his head hurriedly. “Then be here by seven tomorrow. You and Matt can work out your shifts to fit with your other job. And schedule some goddamn breaks between the two, your heard me? You’re of no use to me or your kids if you’re half dead on the floor. Renee, get these three strays something for lunch to take away and then kick them all home to take a nap.”

Erik is hard and soft at the same time, the feeling of safety and understanding he gives cannot be explained in any other way.

With the kids sleeping in their beds, Nicky broke one of his rules and let Erik into his room and his bed. With the weight of the second job taken care of, he’d felt the rush of relief turn into something else and he’d ended up biting his pillow as Erik’s mouth sent him spiraling. When he’d come down from his high, he’d found himself half asleep into his boyfriend’s chest.

“I’d like to meet this boss of yours, one day,” the man is muttering. “I’ll have to shake his hand.”

“I’ll have to build him a statue,” Nicky mutters, already gone for the most part. “He’s saved my ass.”
“I can tell.” Erik kisses his nape and pulls the blankets up to their shoulders. “Sleep now. You’ve got an early morning tomorrow.”

“I’m not even going to complain, just— Wait. I haven’t asked Roland if he can come in to—“

“Nicholas.” Erik’s brow arches. It’s less intimidating and more hot than when Wymack does it. “I’m here. Unless you’re throwing me out now, I’ll be here tomorrow morning too. I can get the twins to school and then go back to college in time for my ten a.m. class. Easy.”

Nicky blinks at him. “You would?”

“Dummy. Of course I would. Now get the fuck to sleep.”

“Don’t dirty talk me when I’m trying to sleep.”

If Erik answered back, Nicky lost it completely.

When the alarm rings, he doesn’t complain. Much.
Nicky and the Twins vs Heartbreak

Chapter Summary

And Aaron vs College Tuition.

I mean, you all know me, angst was bound to happen. On the up side, Birthday Party! Who doesn't like a birthday party?

So, Nicky might be tired. It's a minimal issue though, no big deal. So what if he blacked out a couple times at Eden’s, the stroboscopic lights killing his poor brain? Nobody made a fuss about it, not until he fainted at the Wild Fox and Matt freaked out and called Wymack.

“What did I fucking tell you, you dumbass? You were supposed to have some breaks scheduled in between your jobs!”

“I have,” Nicky complains half-heartedly, his head pumping and hurting even more at every yell hurled his way. “I use ‘em to go get the kids to and from school and to help ‘em out with homework.”

Wymack glares at him, which would be more effective if Nicky wasn’t seeing two of him. “I meant breaks to fucking eat something and sleep, brat, you know it.”

“Ugh,” why can’t the whole place just, you know, stop spinning for a moment? “I’m fine, boss.”

“Like hell you are, man,” Matt pipes, and isn’t he adorable? With that worried look on his face and the body of a boxeur. “You just fainted while making a cappuccino! I barely grabbed you before you crushed your skull open on the counter!”

Now, that’s just an exaggeration. And they say Nicky is the dramatic one.

“When you regain what little brain-mouth filter you had, brat, we’ll all be glad. Matt’s not exaggerating and I’m not keeping you on shift when you can’t even stand on your own two legs. Grab some food, go home and go the fuck to sleep. The Twinyards can spend the afternoon over and Abby can check on you when she comes bring them to your place. You on shift at Eden’s tonight?”

Nicky tries to blink the lights away from his face. “Uh uh.”

“Wrong answer, you’re not. Call ‘em and say you’re sick.”

“Can’t,” Nicky groans, only mildly relieved to feel himself coming back to his body, considering how every muscle in it is screaming bloody murder right now.

“And why not?”

Because Nicky would rather crack his skull open on a hard surface than going back to an empty home and be forced to face the fact that what little toiletries had taken up space on a corner of their
sink disappeared together with the soft scent of mint.

He doesn’t say that though, and not because he’s recovered his filter as much as he’s self-conditioned himself not to ever utter a single word about the looming date. Not even the twins know and, Jesus, Nicky can’t even string two words together in his mind to try and explain to them.

*Hey, kids, you know what happens the week after next? Erik finishes his program! Isn’t it great? Now say goodbye, he’s going back to Germany and will never, ever, come back. Sorry, buddies, we’ve always known it would happen, I just really couldn’t be bothered thinking about the consequences on all of us once the year was over, my bad.*

Andrew is going to hate him. Nicky is not sure he’ll be able to stand it.

Wymack, unaware of his struggle, peeks back into the shop from the door of the storage they’re currently all hiding in. Or not hiding, not he and Matt at least, only Nicky.

Renee shows up with a huge smile on her face and, really, Nicky has no choice but to obey her every word because how can you say no to Renee? Even when she’s dangling her car keys from her fingers and promising to give you a lift to the last place you’d want to be in right now.

*You’re so pathetic, Nicholas.*

Renee goes through all the effort of accompanying Nicky inside and storing all the leftovers Wymack loaded them with as Nicky collapses on the couch, adamantly ignoring his room door.

Not that there aren’t just as many, if not more, memories in the living room, but his bed is still dressed in the sheets Erik gave him as a gag gift last week when they went window shopping for all the Halloween stuff that his European ass always missed on. They’re soft, black and covered in tiny drawings of coffins and skeletons and pumpkins. He should really take them off, he hasn’t slept in the bed since they fought, what, five minutes after they were done making the bed. Thankfully the kids were still at school, but it had taken Nicky all of his acting skills not to let them realize how bad he was feeling.

He hasn’t heard from Erik since. Maybe he should call or at least text, but he’s terrified to.

“Allright, everything is covered and stored away,” Renee announces, returning to the living room. She peeks on him from above the backrest of the couch and her eyes go very soft and very sad. “What are you doing to yourself, Nicky? I liked you so much better when you smiled for real.”

If it were anyone else, Nicky would fake a laugh and make a joke and stick to the farce because that what he does when things go bad. That’s what he did when Erik started pressing so they’d talk about his imminent departure, and what he kept doing when his boyfriend started getting mad. What he kept on doing until the entrance door was slammed, to be honest.

But the thing about Renee is, you feel guilty just thinking about lying to her. She just has this aura to her lithe body, to the pastel rainbow in her platinum hair, to the long red skirt and black wool crop top. Or maybe it’s just the cross hanging from her neck, reminding Nicky of a comfort he’s long since stopped seeking, too tired and defeated and somehow still ashamed. He doesn’t think he has it in himself to risk going through the ostracism again, so he’s never tried to find a new church to go to again, after the disaster with his father’s.
But Renee is what religion was always supposed to be in Nicky’s mind: gentle, caring and so, so loving.

Maybe that’s why he mutters, “I think I lost.”

Renee looks pensive for a while, then circles the couch to go and sit on the coffee table instead. “Those are heavy words,” she whispers. “What makes you say that?”

Nicky laughs at that, and he knows it comes out mean but he can’t help it. What? What about how his whole family turned their backs on him?, how he took the twins in and now he can barely provide for them?, how he’s twenty two and his old friends whisper about him in disgust and cross themselves when his name comes up because, poor Nicky, who got corrupted by the sin of homosexuality and will burn in Hell forever? Or, his personal favorite as of lately, how he found one single person who seemed to love him just as much as his twins and he decided that setting the table for lunch was more of a pressing issue than dealing with the fact that he was leaving their lives forever?

“We all scrape the bottom, at times, Nicky,” Renee says, her hand on Nicky’s wrist and when did it get there? But it’s so soft, so warm and, damn, it’s been so long since anyone except the twins and Erik touched Nicky like he mattered something. “I can see that things are difficult, I don’t know if I’d have the strength to hold on as you’re doing. But, Nicky, you are so far from losing.”

A familiar voice in Nicky’s brain is yelling at him to make a joke, shrug the whole thing off, but his throat is scratchy and his lips part against his will. “How can you tell?”

Renee’s laughter is a waterfall of silver bells. Nicky thinks that the greatest proof of how gay he is, is that he’s not falling for her right now, just watching her tilt her head backward a bit.

“Oh, Nicky, how can you not tell?” She shakes her head at him in mock scolding. “You say you’re working two jobs to raise your children and barely meet end meets? I say Andrew and Aaron speak of you like you’re the only person they trust in the whole world, like their mother was an awful parenthesis they’re working through because somehow, in a year, they already learnt they deserved more than what she gave them, and that’s because you taught them that. I say Wymack and Abby thought they were adopting another young adult in need of help and instead found out you only needed someone to recognize you’re doing well and who fills them up with clients at five am by sending over the patrons who spent the full night at Eden’s. I say, you’re the only one who’s not seeing how great you are.”

Nicky wants to object, he has so many angry words countering every point she made. He’s not a good guardian, he’s not an asset, he’s barely holding it together. But Renee puts a hand on his cheek and the thumb on his lips to keep him silent.

“I say,—“ she adds, serious, “—all you’ve left to learn is how to ask for help when you need it.”

“I can’t,” he denies, instinctually.

“Why not?”

“Because—“ it’s my mess, I did this and I need to fix this, I can’t bother anybody else with this, I need to do it on my own, “—I have no choice.”

Renee blinks. “How come?”

“I can’t ask for help,” Nicky reiterates. “I’ve got nobody to ask it from, so I have to do it on my own.”
“You don’t think you have anyone?” This time, she tilts her head to a side. “Interesting.” Nicky doesn’t see anything interesting anywhere, but Renee is already standing up. “Sleep some, Nicky. Maybe you’ll see a bit better with a clearer head.”

Nicky thinks he hears mutter a soft prayer under her breath, but the last thing he remembers is a picture of her caressing her necklace and then it’s all black.

Abby arrives at five and Nicky opens the door with an apology already on his lips which dies when she shoves something in his mouth. Eyes crossed as he tries to look at whatever it is, all Nicky really hears is a kid’s giggling somewhere down low.

The thing in his mouth chirps and Abby pulls it out, finally putting it into comfortable view. “Is that a toddler’s thermometer? Really?”

“I would have kept the kids for dinner, too, but it’s better to check the temperature before eating,” she says, indifferent to his shock. “It looks like you don’t have a fever at least. Hand, please? Palm up.”

Honestly, Nicky blames his own compliancy on some leftover sleep. His tiredness vanishes immediately when his finger stings, though. “Ouch!”

There’s a tiny bit of blood on the pad of his index and Abby is reading off some kind of machine that now Nicky knows has a needle hidden somewhere. Ominous.

His trousers are pulled a bit and he looks down to find Katelyn offering him a kleenex for his wound. The twins stand very close together behind her and are looking at his finger with matching frowns and expressions of discomfort.

“Your sugar levels are still quite low,” Abby announces. “That’s probably why today happened. Try to eat something and get a full night of sleep, okay? Maybe eat some extra fruit or a cookie, after dinner.” Eyes twinkling with mirth, she adds, “Ice-cream, perhaps.”

“Uh?” But Nicky is too slow. His own personal doctor has already hidden away all her torture devices and is telling her daughter to wave bye, in the time it takes him to collect the dots. “Oh.”

“What happened today?” Aaron asks as he and Andrew finally get inside.

“I just didn’t feel very well, so Wymack let me come home early,” Nicky says, sticking to the truth for just enough not to feel weird. “So, dinner? And I’m not on shift tonight so we can stay in and watch a cartoon on the couch, if you want.”

Immediately, Aaron starts screeching “Basil The Great Mouse Detective!” as a crazy banshee and Nicky watches him run to his room to leave his stuff. Quite less enthusiastically, Andrew asks if there’s going to be ice-cream.

“You heard the doctor,” Nicky jokes, extending a hand to let him hold onto the middle finger. Andrew is like a video game character, he only has so many energy points to spend when he’s around other people and after that he’ll need time to recharge. When it happens, he usually goes quieter or completely silent and relies on physical contact much more. “Ice-cream is a must.”
During dinner, as Nicky tries to get Andrew to stop playing with his peas because rolling them around the plate is not going to get him out of eating them, Aaron announces he’d like to play Exy now that they started grade school.

It’s so out of the blue Nicky can’t stop himself from asking why.

Aaron shrugs, staring at his chicken as if it’s some alive thing come from space to kill him. “Because if I get good at it, I’ll get a scholar sportship for college.”

Nicky almost spits out the water in his mouth. In the attempt not to, he inhales half of it in his lungs instead and ends up coughing with tears in his eyes. Neither of the twins look any more than slightly curious about his near death. Andrew even keeps fighting the peas.

Finally, he manages to wheeze, “College?!”

“Yes, college,” Aaron sighs heavily. “If you’re really good at Exy in high school, people will pay for college for you.” He stabs his chicken to prove his point. “Kat says college costs a lot of money.”

Andrew looks up from his plate with a frown. “More than Sunday Special Sundae?”


“More,” Nicky breaths out, voice still scratchy. “Definitely more than the triple S, Drew. And it’s called a sport scholarship because it pays for your school in exchange of you playing a sport for them.”

Andrew falls into another pensive frown. “That’s a lot for studying.”

No shit, but Nicky doesn’t really look away from Aaron, who’s still stabbing his chicken and going through his logic. “Well, Kat says that if you’re really good in high school, you can get a sport scholarship. She is going to get one for cheering and Kevin is going to get one for Exy so their parents only have to pay for her grad school.”

“Grad school?!” What the fuck happened with kids wanting to be cowboys and princesses, Nicky wonders.

Aaron nods, chest puffed with pride for his best friend. “She’s gonna be a doctor when she grows up.”

Of course she is. Nicky has a flash from the afternoon and smiles a bit despite himself. Once he’s over the shock of having a seven year old lay out a life-long plan over boiled frozen peas and half-burned grilled chicken, it’s kind of endearing. In a very Aaron way.

Finally, Aaron effectively chews on a piece of meat. A victory in itself, so Nicky decides not to push his luck and tell him not to speak with his mouth full. “And you need to be very good at Exy in high school, so you need to be already good in middle school.”

It’s hard to counter such a sound reasoning. “So,” Nicky says, trying to follow the speech, “you need to start…?”

“Now,” Aaron declares. “Kevin already started!”
Nicky lays an elbow on the table and his chin on his palm, thinking. “You know there are scholarships for good grades too, right? Or other sports, if you don’t like Exy.”

“I can do Exy, too.”

Nicky turns to Andrew, frowning a bit. “I thought you didn’t like it?”

“I don’t.” Andrew snipes right back, laying his fork down as if in surrendering to the vegetables still in his plate. “But Kevin won’t stop being annoying about it.”

“You shouldn’t do it just because Kevin wants you to,” Nicky offers half-heartedly, brain already running numbers and hypotheticals on how much it might cost to sign both kids up for the sport. He played Exy himself when he was in middle school, decently though he was far from a champion, but his parents were taking care of it back then and they took him off the team as soon as he came out at fifteen. He can’t remember how much it all was, but he has an half-idea about the prices for adult equipment and it’s not exactly like a Sundae every two weeks.

Andrew shrugs. “He put a note in my bag saying he’ll give me his share of chocolate milk if I join his team.”

This manages to make Nicky chuckle, despite everything. “That’s more like you,” he admits, for once absolutely at easy and unworried about offending his cousin. When Andrew doesn’t even react, he turns back to Aaron instead. “And, you know you don’t have to do the same thing of Andrew, if you don’t want to.”

Aaron nods, with the certainty of someone who’s already mulled every option over. “If we do the same thing, we can train at home too,—” Yeah, absolutely not, Nicky is still hoping to get his deposit back if they ever move out of here, thank you very much. “—and Kat wants to cheer for the Exy team.”

Which is how Nicky knows Aaron won’t budge. If this kid doesn’t marry that girl when they’re adults, he will demand a refund, seriously.

Right now, he just shakes his head in disbelief in front of the kid’s inquiring look. “Wow. I can’t believe my little cousin has his life together more than me, already.”

“What’s it mean?” Andrew frowns.

Shit. “Uh, it’s just when you, you know, know what you’re doing and what you want to do and what to do to get what you want? And you do it?”

Aaron tilts his head to a side. “But you do have your life together?” he asks. “Like, when we go to the Fox and you order lunch?”

Nicky chuckles. “Yeah, well, it’s a bit about bigger things, you know? Like college, for examples.”

“You didn’t go to college?” Aaron asks, around another mouthful of chicken. Nicky buys himself time by cleaning his chin with a napkin.

“I didn’t finish high school,” he admits, the usual sting of shame rising even now that he’s just with his cousins. It’s not as bad as when he was doing job interviews and people looked at him with arched brows, but it’s still not a nice feeling when he’s confronted with his baby cousin planning on getting scholarships.

Aaron asks, “you didn’t?!” at the same time as Andrew asks, “you can?” Looks like Nicky will
have two very different high schoolers in his hands, in a few years.

“I couldn’t,” he settles for, trying not to egg either kid on. “I would have liked to, but stuff happened and I had to drop out.”

“How old were you?” Aaron asks. He’s all genuine honesty and confusion. Though he looks a bit judgmental, it’s just because Aaron as a person is judging of everything and everyone and every given time, it holds no true malice.

Nicky feels the sudden urge to play with his food, too. He strives not to only because he knows the twins would hold it against him every time he tried to scold them for the rest of eternity. “Just turned seventeen.”

He had packed his bags immediately after he’d been let out of the camp and before his brain got too bad. His father hadn’t even tried to stop him, luckily, just declared that he’d done all he could to save his son who clearly didn’t want to be saved at all. After that, he’d been on his own completely.

It had been a messy month, that he can’t even recall completely to be honest, before he stumbled into the owner of Eden’s Twilight who’d taken one look at him, sighed very deeply and gave him the keys to the flat above the club together with the job in the kitchens Nicky’d been applying for.

Luckily, the kids take the news in stride. Maybe seventeen seems old to them. Nicky remembers being a kid and thinking he couldn’t wait until sixteen, when he’d be free to do whatever he wanted.

And then sixteen happened and now he spends his life trying to forget that year. How ironic.

He’s trying to gently wrestle Andrew’s hand back around his fork, half-heartedly threatening to keep the ice-cream for himself if more peas aren’t eaten soon, when Aaron returns to his topic with words that strike like a bullseye.

“When is Erik coming over again?” he says, completely unaware. “I want to ask him how much college costs.”

There’s just so much domesticity in those words: the simple agreement that Erik will soon come over because that’s what he does, he comes over and eats with them and plays with them and knows more about college than Nicky because Nicky is a drop-out who run from home and — Jesus Christ, we’ve been over this. You dropped out. End of it. You found yourself a job and got a place to live all the same, so stop fussing about it.

“I don’t know,” and please, God, don’t let them see through my bullcrap. “He’s very busy these days.“

He doesn’t say soon because he’s scared he might be lying.

It’s well past midnight and he’s sleeping, on the couch, when a little hand brings Nicky back to the world of awaken people.

“What…” He squints his eyes, trying to get a better look in the dark. “Aaron? What’s going on, buddy?”
Aaron looks well on his way back to his dreams. He’s holding his pillow to the chest like a plush toy, his hair is shaped into an awfully endearing bed-head and he’s scratching at his eye with a closed fist. *So cute, damn.*

“Nicky?” he mutters, and Nicky pulls himself to sit up. Maybe he’s sleep walking? It never happened before, but who knows.

“Yes, Aaron?”

Aaron goes forward so fast and gracelessly Nicky shoots to catch him, thinking he’s falling from sleep. Instead, the kid’s arms try to get a solid grip around his neck and his face hides against Nicky’s jaw.

This is weird. A nightmare? “Aaron?”

“’M really happy we live with you, Nicky.” The twin drawls his voice as if he’s drunk and Nicky’s heart stops beating for the longest time. Aaron nuzzles his face against his cousin’s skin for a while, before dropping the bomb. “Love you.“

Nicky doesn’t cry.

He says, steady as he can, “I love you too, Aaron,” and then he stands and brings the kid back to his bed. Aaron is already out as lights when he’s tucked in, so Nicky leaves quietly.

Only when he’s in the living room, he pulls his phone out and hits dial.

“No, Erik, just— Let me finish, okay?”

The street is dark and there’s nobody around, but they are just outside the entrance door of the condo and therefore pretty visible from almost all the windows. Somehow, neither has the strength to care about being seen and getting into troubles for that. It’s late, they’re tired and broken and cold, and they don’t have the energy to spare for more the world’s bullshit after the load they’re already buried into.

Erik’s mouth shoots closed, almost instinctively. His shoulders drop, the strength always in him disappears.

Nicky smiles, or tries to, and brings a hand to touch the side of his face.

“If I had met you at seventeen,—“ he says, but it comes out as a promise, as a prayer, “—I have no doubt you would have saved me. You would have burst onto the scene like prince charming to the rescue, and you would have saved my life. You would have brought me to Germany and I would have come along because there would have been nothing left here for me. And we would have been happy, Erik, so happy I would have felt like walking on clouds every morning I entered the bathroom and found it flooded from your inability to shower without making a mess. We would have bought a house and moved in together and everybody would have tried to tell us it’s too soon and we’re rushing things, but we wouldn’t have cared because we would have known.” He takes a shaky breath. “We would have known there would have never been anyone else.”

Erik’s eyes holds all the sadness in the world as he brings his own hand to cover Nicky’s, but they’re also soft, understanding and accepting, always. And Nicky feels them coming, the knot in
his throat and the tears in his eyes, but he can’t stop so he just speaks through his own broken voice.

“But I am not seventeen, Erik,” he whispers, his words so easily lost in the night and under the roar of engines. “I had to save myself long ago and now I have the twins to think about. And I can’t pack their things, get them on a plane to somewhere they don’t even speak the language and expect them to rebuild everything they have because I fell in love with someone from nine thousand miles away.”

He thinks of Katelyn giggling when Aaron hugs her at the waist and she hooks her chin above his head. He thinks of Andrew scooting closer to Kevin on the couch, no matter how much he complains about the Exy continuously passing on TV. He thinks of Aaron’s devote care for his school books and Andrew’s fascinated eyes as Renee lets him watch the video of one of her matches on her phone.

He thinks of quiet Andrew finding his middle finger for comfort and he thinks of sleepy Aaron hiding in his neck.

He knows he’s crying already. "They can’t save themselves, Erik; and even if they could, they shouldn’t have to. So I’m going to be the one who does it for them.” Another attempted smile, another failure. It sure feels like he’s good at nothing but those, lately. “I can’t do that in Germany, or pouring myself over a long distance relationship that’s seven hours jet-lagged.”

When Erik opens his mouth, Nicky doesn’t expect anger or shouts or accusations. He fell in love with this man exactly because he’s not that kind of person. Instead, he expects soft words of understanding, a declaration of trust and maybe love, and perhaps, if the world doesn’t completely hate him, a promise to come and say goodbye to the twins before he leaves so that they can get their closure too.

He’s not expecting a sob. He’s not expecting Erik’s arms to snake around him like a python and hold like he’s dying in his grasp. He’s not expecting to feel tears hitting his shoulder and soaking through the cloth there.

Sometimes he forgets, how much Erik loves him back.

He holds back just as thigh and he lets the night happen around them.

Aaron’s eyes are wide and he keeps whipping his head back and forth from the two men sitting in front of him, but Nicky prefers his outright shock — he can work with it — to Andrew’s absolute stillness and blank face.

“’Drew,” he tries, but that’s all he gets to leave out. Andrew is up and running to his room before Nicky can find the words to explain.

“But you’re coming back,” Aaron says, his voice firm because there isn’t another option, not in his world. “You’re coming back. When is it?”

“Aaron, I don’t think—” Erik stops himself. He thinks, he breaths heavily, he looks lost. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to come back. Things are very complicated right now.” Nicky watches as he stands up, only to kneel on the floor in front of Aaron. "My family is waiting for me;” he says, honest to the marrow. “My sister is waiting for me. I need to go back for them.”
“But—“ Whatever Aaron was planning on saying, it dies down on a sob. Nicky pulls him from the couch and on his lap as soon as his breathing gets erratic, but Aaron just clenches his fists in his shirt and keeps sobbing without actually crying, getting big mouthfuls too often to be able to let out his breath too.

“Hey, hey, buddy, breath with me, you can do that, right? Aaron, can you breath with me?”

Nicky can feel Erik’s eyes on them. He doesn’t need to look to know the heaviness of what they are doing to these kids is tearing his ex apart. He can’t take it right now.

“I could— Maybe I should try and talk to Andrew?” Erik asks, and Nicky nods, partially only to get out of his sight.

Erik meekly nods and then leaves to the twins’ room. He just hopes Andrew is in there.

Aaron’s breaths have slowed down but he’s shaking his head. “I want him to stay, Nicky, make him stay!”

“You know I can’t do that, buddy,” God, Nicky wishes he could. “You heard Erik, his family has been waiting for him to come back for a long time. We’ve had him for a year, now we need to give him back to his sister and his momma and his daddy, can you see that?”

Aaron doesn’t answer, just shakes in Nicky’s arms so Nicky lets him be.

Erik comes out of the twins room almost fifteen minutes later looking worse for wear and Nicky stiffens. Aaron must feel it because he pulls back from his chest to look, and he must also agree because after a look to the German he hops off Nicky’s lap to run to his room too.

Nicky scoots over to make room on the couch, but Erik shakes his head. “You should go check on him, I— He wouldn’t say a word.”

Andrew going non-verbal is familiar enough reaction that Nicky doesn’t utterly freak out, but the idea of going back to the first days frays his nerves so he moves to obey. When he passes by, he puts a hand on Erik’s shoulder comfortingly, or at least he hopes so, but says nothing.

And really, what can he say?

In the room, there’s single budge under the covers of Andrew’s bed and it’s too big to be a single kid. Nicky sits on the end of mattress and lets his weight be telling of his presence.

He can see the twins fight for a moment, when Aaron pulls down the sheets and Andrew hastily pulls them back up. There’s some ruffling under the covers, though no words reach Nicky’s ears, before Aaron attempts again and Andrew shuts him down again.

Great, they’re not getting anywhere like this. “You can stay under,” he tries, watching as the bundle falls into sudden stillness. “I will just talk for a bit, okay?”

Of course he gets no answer, what was he expecting? He shuffles in his place to fight the urge to hide under a blanket too. As of lately, he finds himself falling again and again into the comfort methods of the kids and he’s ninety percent sure that’s not a good thing.
“Erik cannot stay,” he says, voice surprisingly even but maybe because he spent the night rehearsing in front of the bathroom mirror. “He needs to go back to his own home, for a lot of reasons. That doesn’t mean he doesn’t care for us, just that having him here was a temporary thing. Like going to a birthday party? It’s fun, but you need to leave, at a certain point.”

The blanket raises with a muffled ’thud’, which Nicky interprets as Andrew kicking it to express his disapproval. “I know you don’t believe me, ‘Drew, but he really cares. He’s trying. And I can promise you, he’ll miss us as much as we’re going to miss him.”

There’s a moment of silence, then more shuffling ensues. It looks more violent this time and Nicky nervously outstretches a hand. Should he be patient or actually check that the twins aren’t plucking each other’s eyes out?

“Of course he’s not, you dummy,” comes Aaron hissing voice through the duvet and Nicky sighs heavily, arm falling back to his side.

“Aaron, how many times do I have to tell you not to call your brother nam—“ Nicky almost shits himself when the blanket is suddenly pulled down, but only enough for a blond ruffle of hair and two piercing almond eyes to stare at him from the mattress.

Andrew is, unsurprisingly, frowning. Nicky wonders when he stopped caring about that being the kid’s default expression. He looks at his cousin for a longer moment before he utters, in a rough voice, “You?”

Nicky blinks. “What about me?”

Andrew’s legs kick out under the covers. Aaron pops out with a complaint, but adds nothing to the conversation.

It’s a shot in the dark when Andrew doesn’t want to speak at all, so Nicky is a bit hesitant when he says, “Well, I’ll miss him lots too?”

Andrew’s frown intensifies. Shit, what did Nicky do, this time?

Aaron turns to his brother with a glare. “I told you so,” he claims, with all the haughtiness a kid can process. Andrew glares at him.

“What?” Nicky tries, getting all eyes on himself. “What did you tell him?”

But Aaron doesn’t answer. He just looks at his brother and lets Andrew find comfort in his glare a bit longer. “Germany,” he says, in the end, which Nicky takes honestly too long to process.

*Germany*. Christ. Every time, Nicky gives something for granted and then something happens to remind him that these kids are used to have, and ask for, nothing.

“Andrew,” he calls, softly, as he outstretches his hand. “I’m not going to Germany. Of course I will miss Erik, of course I would love it if I could be with him, but I’m not leaving. For a thousand reasons, but mostly because I’m not going to leave you two.”

He already knows he won’t be getting an answer, because Andrew’s silent times never last this little, but it still stings a bit when Andrew pulls his covers back to hide him completely again.

After a moment, Aaron pops out with a huff. “It’s too hot,” he complains, squirming out of bed completely. “I’m going to ask Erik about college.”
“You do that, buddy.”

Sometimes, the twins really seems to be able to read each other’s mind, because Aaron closes the door when he leaves. Fifteen seconds later or some, the bulge under the bed moves and wriggles closer to Nicky’s thigh. A little longer and it starts trembling in a way that Nicky can very well interpret, but no sound escapes and somehow he even doubts Andrew is shedding any tear at all.

It is still quite a testament of distress, so Nicky touches carefully where he supposes Andrew’s back can be and starts caressing up and down slowly. “It will be okay, ’Drew. We’re tight as thieves, you can trust me to stay.” The voice in his head won’t stop screaming, *it’s all your fault*. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting, ’Drew. I promise it will get better, though. And I’ll be there. I promise, Andrew, I’ll always be there for you and Aaron.”

Again, Andrew doesn’t answer. He pushes closer, though, enough that Nicky can feel his head against his thigh, and stays there.

They allow themselves some time before slipping out of the room and Andrew stubbornly holds onto Nicky’s pants even as he looks at Erik, lets him close again, fiddles with the offered Jenga Tower pieces.

Even the games, they all play quietly.

“I swear, brat, if you collapse again—“

“Your wife cleared me, old man!”

“She said to take it easy! That’s not taking it easy!”

“It’s just tea!”

“It’s a sixty pounds box of tea packages, you dumbass!”

“You know, boss? You probably shouldn’t yell so much cusses so early in the morning,” Matt pipes in, his head alone appearing from the door of the storage room. “I have a couple high schoolers that look pretty distressed, here.”

Nicky shoots Wymack a triumphant look, which only earns him an half hearted threat of firing. The first few times, his heart used to skip a beat, but now he’s learnt his boss is all bark and no bite. At least not with his personnel. “High schoolers should be already in class by now, anyway.”

Matt arches a brow. “Boss, it’s Saturday.”

“Don’t you have a counter to manage, Boyd? Out of my sight!”

Matt laughs and Nicky takes the moment to slip past Wymack with the box still in his hands. No matter what the old man says, after sleeping in one afternoon and a full night he already feels like he could take on the world. The fact that Abby has currently taken the twins and her kids out to the park to play is also making his work much easier since he doesn’t have to constantly check that Andrew doesn’t try to get Renee to teach him how to dropkick people. Aaron is probably still talking to Kevin about scholarships, but that is a problem for future, off-shift Nicky.
When he is done storing the box under the counter, he finds a cup of coffee waving invitingly in front of his nose. He shifts his focus further and Renee’s soft face comes in sight. “For me?”

“A pick-me up,” she claims and lowers the coffee enough for him to see the design on the foam. “I’m still experimenting but I think I’m finally getting the hang of it.”

“Oh my gosh, Renee, this kitten is so cute!”

“It’s a heart.”

“Oh.”

Somewhere behind Nicky, Matt is wheezing. “Jesus, dude, you’re so bad with girls, wow.”

“Thank fuck I’m not into them, then,” he huffs, and again Renee blesses him with her silver bells laughter. “Tell me there’s lots of caffeine under your missed career as an artist?”

Renee smiles. “As many shots of espresso as Wymack would allow me.”

“Which is still half of what he gets for himself.” Nicky shakes his head in fake theatrics. “So unjust is the life of retail service workers with cruel bosses.”

“You’re free to leave at your leisure, brat,” Wymack yells from the storage room. And how the fuck did he hear them? “But before that, what this story about college? Kevin’s been on my case to bring him to the court even more than usual.”

“Is that even possible?” Matt asks. He is leaning against the counter with an open palm and a hip and Nicky mourns him being straight once again. “I thought that kid already thought about Exy, like, twenty-four seven. Does he even dream of it, you think?”

“He does,” Wymack huffs, joining them behind the counter. There’s not many costumers yet, what being seven in a Saturday morning, and all those inside have already been served, so they get a moment of reprieve. Renee is technically off-duty, but she still comes over more often than not when she waits for her brother to be done with his English tutoring lessons. “So?”

Nicky groans to the sky. “Katelyn told Aaron about sport scholarships and now he’s thinking about picking up Exy so he can be recruited in high school. Apparently, Kevin told him he should start right now as he’s already almost too late.”

Matt wolf-whistles, and the sound covers Wymack exasperated curse. Renee shakes her head fondly and puts a hand on Nicky’s shoulder. “Do you think he’ll forget about it soon?”

As if Aaron were the type to ever let go of something.

“Not in a million years,” he scoffs. “Especially now that Kevin promised Andrew his chocolate snacks if he starts playing with them too.”

The coffee in his hand is hot, but he takes a sip anyway because when you have two kids with an attitude, two jobs involving costumer service and you’re a single gay kind-of-parent with no family to help you out, you develop the skill to chug coffee at any hour, in any shape and at any temperature.

“The twin’s birthday’s on the fourth of November anyway, so I’m trying to jiggle the numbers around to pay the appliance fees for training with the Little Exy team,” he says, looking at Wymack. “I meant to ask, how much is it? I’m going on hypotheticals here, and that’s not helping
“Equipment is the most pricy thing, actually.” Wymack arches a brow. “Which positions are they going to play?”

“I have no idea,” Nicky shrugs, trying not to let the words make him freak out too bad. *It’s not like you weren’t expecting it.* “I think Kevin wants Andrew to be a goalkeeper, but Aaron is still to decide. I used to play as back-liner, but he’s really small for his age so I don’t know if he could be one too.”

“Kids on court all have the same things, except for the goalkeepers,” Wymack nods. “Kevin outgrew two different uniforms and a racquet already. Remind me to bring ‘em over so you can check, but they should fit Aaron just fine, at least for now.”

What?

“I should still have my old jersey and racquet too, actually,” Renee pipes in, looking exited. “I guess they could fit Andrew, indeed. I was quite on the short side myself at his age.”

“Wait a second, guys, what—“

“Oh, fuck off, brat,” Wymack interrupts him before Nicky can blow into a full panic. “It’s the little monsters’ birthday and we’re planning gifts, you don’t get a say on the matter. It’s hand-me-down’s, for fuck’s sake, not some expensive shit.”

“You just said equipment is expensive!”

“Yeah, if it’s *new*. And let me tell you now, if they’ll decide to be serious they’ll have to get their own shit, that fits them best, and that will be a shítload of money. But for now?” He gave Nicky a look. “They’re brats who just want to play. It’ll be okay.”

“Not to mention, there’s not really any other use for those things,” Renee adds, nodding wisely. “I kept mine because it held a bit of sentimental value, but mostly because I knew Stephanie wanted to adopt more kids and I thought maybe they’d want to play Exy too. Turns out Jean is a disaster as a goalkeeper, he’s much better as a back-liner, so my stuff isn’t of help for him.” She turns a pair of deadly puppy eyes on Nicky. “It would make me really happy to give it to Andrew, Nicky. He’s a lovely kid.”

“Now, let’s not lie that big,” Wymack scoffs, but Nicky doesn’t have the heart to act offended. He’s not even sure he has a heart left, period, because it’s been swelling with every word and now it’s ready to burst, already almost pushing tears out of his eyes.

“Guys,” he tries to say, but he doesn’t know how to finish it. He really has no other way to give the twins all, but it’s still so amazing that these people would offer so much. He’s not sure how to take it.

He thinks back to Renee saying *interesting* when he told her he was alone, and he thinks he can see why she reacted the way she did. Now, he puts a hand on the one she still has on his arm and she beams at him.

“Can I join in too?” Matt adds, landing heavily on Nicky’s back and wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “My girlfriend is the coach for the Little Exy team. I’ll have a chat with her and we can take care of the participation fees for the year.”

“Now chill out, let me make a gift too!” Everybody laughs, Matt denies and Nicky thinks that this
feels suspiciously like his family before he came out, just less judgmental and more honest and more affectionate and happier. So, yeah, basically nothing like how his family was, but all like he always wished his family would be. “Thank you, guys, really. I don’t know what to say.”

Matt hip-checks him. “Solemnly swear to sleep sometimes?”

“I knew there was a catch, somewhere.”

Wymack cusses, but it sounds like I care.

Erik pushed his departure to the fifth of November and somehow still denies it being connected to the twins’ birthday. Nicky arches a brow at him, but no amount of prodding will make the stubborn jerk change his version.

It’s not a big thing, mostly because the twins hate big things. Abby offered the Wild Fox since it’s its closing day — Wymack had complained it was his shop for an whole total of three seconds before she shut him up with a look — and Renee baked some pastries and Matt blew some balloons and Katelyn and Kevin invited Jean and a certain Jeremy too. Apparently, the first is friend with Andrew for the mere reason that they both think Renee could bench press a truck and the second is friend with Aaron simply because Jeremy makes friends with everyone, whether they like it or not.

Seriously, Nicky has never seen such a weird group of children.

He’d gotten the kids up in the morning and steeled himself through the looks of betrayals he got when he told them they had somewhere to be and there was no time to get breakfast. He’d kept checking the back the whole ride because he had a feeling Andrew was going to try and stab him with a pen.

When they’d made it to the café, Aaron had sent him a dispassionate glare. “It’s not even open!”

“You two, my boys, have deep trust issues to work with,” Nicky had told them, shaking his head though fondly. “Let’s get in, you miscreants.”

Everybody had been advised against yelling of any kind, so Aaron and Andrew had gotten wind of something happening when Renee had opened the door for them with a green and yellow party hat on. “Here come the party boys,” she’d announced, cheerful, and Aaron had gasped loudly. Andrew hadn’t outwardly reacted, but he’d scooted closer to let her pat his head, which made Nicky burst into an happy dance behind their backs.

Inside, Wymack, Abby, Matt with his girlfriend and Jeremy’s lesbian parents had clapped politely at their entrance, while Katelyn had been much more forward and had jumped Aaron immediately, yelling an heartfelt “Happy birthday!”

Kevin had bounced on his feet, continuously asking his father when he could give out the gifts, which had made Abby laugh.

Aaron had been enthusiast of his uniform. Nicky had smiled at him. “I’ll get you a brand new one when you’re older,” he’d tried to say, but Aaron had just been too giddy for just having his own uniform that he hadn’t even stuck around long enough to hear the end of the sentence. “And I love you too, buddy, uh?”
“What were you expecting?” Wymack had huffed. “They are kids. The moment you say present they already forgot you exist.”

Andrew had been less happy about the prospect of starting to play Exy regularly than he’d been of finding out his jersey had been Renee’s. He’d gone all the way to reach out for her sleeve and mutter a soft thank you directly to her.

Erik had somehow whipped out two German stuffed animals with a zip on their mouths. “They’re called Sorgen Fresser, which means Worry Eater,” he’d said, handing Andrew one that looked like a brown cat with a red and white striped body and to Aaron one similar to a light blue cartoonish mouse. "When something makes you sad or worried, you should write it on a piece of paper and put it in their mouths, so they can eat it away for you.”

Both kids had looked enthralled by the prospective and handled the toys with soft touches and vague reverence.

Later in the party, Erik had confessed to Nicky with a bit of shame of his mother using that trick to find out what was bothering him when he was a child. “I wouldn’t recommend breaking their trust, though. I was really pissed at my mom when I found out. It just makes you feel better to do the whole routine, you know?” Nicky had just nodded, smiled and pointed out that it must have taken at least a month to get those things shipped from Germany. Erik had claimed to have gotten them off Amazon at the last minute, which was so clearly a lie.

Matt and his girlfriend Dan had handed Nicky the official papers that marked the twins as players for the Columbia Little Exy team. She’d smirked. “I can’t wait to see them getting started, Kevin was starting to get irritating.”

With the Exy thing out of the way, Nicky had allowed himself to splurge on the kid’s cake and to get them some more winter clothes, which they needed anyway, with funny drawings or in funny shapes. Aaron had been clearly amused by his red mittens with a stylized black cat on and Andrew had given a long and not-frowning look at the black wool hat with fake cat ears on top. A win, if Nicky ever got one.

For a party with only six kids, it had gone on remarkably long and left Nicky utterly exhausted, which is why Renee took pity on him and handed him the coffee he was now sipping on a stool at the counter, body twisted uncomfortably to always have the twins in his field of vision.

“That went well,” Matt cheers, turning to smile to one of Jeremy’s moms. Nicky still isn’t sure which is Sara and which is Laila. “Your kid is like a labrador in human shape, and I say it wholly in positive.”

The woman snorts. “You just never had to get him to take a bath.” She takes a drink of her soda and then says something in Spanish. It takes Nicky a while to realize she asked about his origins because the words feel foreigner after so long without using them.

“My mamá is Mexican,” he articulates with some difficulty. “But I’ve never met my family from there, and I’ve never been to.”

The woman he’s now pretty sure is Sara Alvarez tilts her head to a side. “I’ve never lived without my Mexican family. I don’t think I’d be able to stand all this American-ness if I didn’t have some decent food to come home to in the evening.”

“Amen to that.”
“Nicky cooks Mexican!”

“Jes— Aaron! When did you get here?!”

Aaron ignores him to stare at Alvarez. “He’s really good. It’s not spicy!”

Which, Nicky is pretty sure, is exactly what a woman like Sara would consider not good, but at least she’s polite enough to smile at Aaron and say she bets it’s amazing. Happy that his love for non-spicy Mexican food has been approved, Aaron just jogs back to where Katelyn is trying to learn a card game from Jeremy. Andrew is staring intently too and doesn’t react when his twin holds onto the hem of his sleeve when he joins.

Sara smiles at them and then looks at Nicky. “You know that’s probably an offense punishable by death, right?” she jokes.

Nicky groans. “I make it spicy for myself! Very spicy! So much spice you couldn’t handle it!”

“Well, then I’d like to try it,” she replies with the smile of a cat that got absolutely all the cream.

“How, don’t do it,” Matt warns, but the tone of his voice says do it, do it, do it! Or maybe that’s just Nicky’s wishful thinking.

“Sure,” he says indeed, because he loves to embarrass himself. “You should all come over for dinner one night.”

“Jeremy would love it, I’m sure,” Alvarez coos. “I’ll give you my number and you can call me one night that you’re off.”

“Or,—” Renee offers, with a smile that’s only slightly devious but still enough to look so weird on her face, at least in Nicky’s humble and worshipping opinion. “—you could leave the kids at our place and have a night out just adults?”

“Bitch, what is that?” Sara groans. “I haven’t been to a bar that doesn’t have a kids menu option in so long.”

Nicky makes a disbelieving sound. “I haven’t been to a club without having my kids upstairs of the place for almost two years now.”

Sara, Matt and Renee all blink at him. “Jesus,” he finally says. “Dude, we’re so going out one of these nights, what the heck.”

Renee nods sagely. “It will do you good.”

“Get Dan on with this, would you?” Sara asks Matt. “She always finds the places with the best events.”

Nicky doesn’t offer much more input, he’s just content watching these people organizing themselves around him as if his hectic schedule and two children aren’t the end of the world and sometimes sneaking peeks at his kids still playing.

Andrew is winning. Kevin doesn’t look happy about it. Jean looks a bit happy that Kevin is losing. Jeremy, Katelyn and Aaron found something else to keep themselves occupied with.

That’s how Erik manages to sneak up on him, laying a kiss on his temple. “I should really go.”

He should. His flight leaves at six in the morning tomorrow, which means he needs to be at the
airport at four, which means he needs to start driving in the middle of the night and he should get some sleep and one last check on his luggages done.

Nicky will not see him off at the airport. He doesn’t quite hate himself so much and he’d feel bad leaving the twins on the night of their birthday for that. Also, he’s cried enough as it is.

“Be careful,” he says, because that’s what you tell someone who’s leaving, right?

Erik nods. “You too.”

It’s not like they didn’t say goodbye too many times in the past few days, they just agreed they wouldn’t make a big deal out of it today. The twins already know Erik’s going to leave in the middle of the party; the hope is that it will keep them from being too distraught.

From what Nicky has gathered, Erik already told them goodbye. They’d both looked quite sad, but went over it fast now that they were used to the idea and nobody cried. Not yet, at least.

Nicky foresees the worst for the night, but he’s not going to tell Erik. Instead, he stands up enough to give one last, very fast and innocent kiss. Erik squeezes his hand for another second and then turns abruptly, clearly forcing himself to get over with this.

The door closes behind him and Nicky hates that it’s glass and he can see Erik until he gets into his car and drives away.

“Yeah,” Matt mutters after a moment of awkward silence. “You really need a night out, bro.”

Nicky’s laughter is only slightly wet.

In the next few days, the sadness only has chance to sneak on Nicky at night, because the days are full of work and handling kids who are trying out a new sport and getting called at work about his kids trying out a new sport.

He arrives at the Wild Fox with a brand new shiner one day and glares at Wymack’s arched brow. “I’m not getting the deposit on the house back.”

“You have two kids,” the man reminds him. “Were you really expecting to?”
Nicky would say he is a good fuck. It’s not narcissism or overconfidence, God knows there’s no risk of that one. It’s just a natural result of long nights using sex as an unhealthy coping mechanism to deal with nightmares, rejections and all the fun stuff.

He snorts to himself. That went from zero to a hundred really quick, but the point stands: he is good at fucking.

So it’s not exactly fair that he lays breathless on the mattress, spread eagle staring at the ceiling, while Matt walks around in all his naked glory chattering about food and clothes and children. “I swear, Matthew Donovan Boyd, if you try and mention my kids now…”

Matt raises his hands in a surrendering gesture, though he’s holding a water bottle in one. “Hey, I was just saying, practice won’t be over until another hour. What are you up for?”

Nicky almost says, another round, but honestly? Matt his huge and Nicky hasn’t had penetrative sex in long enough that he’s fucking sore now. He wants to curl up in a burrito in bed and let sleep claim him, even if he has a feeling that if he says that Matt will panic about him overworking himself again and would call Wymack without even putting some pants on.

He settles for, “something to eat sounds nice.” He rolls on his side. “You’re sure Dan will be okay with that?”

“Dude, you already asked five times,” Matt huffs, rolling his eyes. “I told you Dan is fine with this. She’s got a girl she sometimes fucks with, too. Also, she likes you. It’s fine, really.”

Nicky hums something. He still can’t believe his luck, Matt being not only bisexual but also in an open relationship and interested. “For now, she does. I’m waiting for the twins to show their true selves and then we see if she still likes me.”

“Hey, it’s been three months already! Give them some credit. Dan says they haven’t even started any brawl out of the court.”
Nicky doesn’t even blink. “Yet.”

“Dude.”

“Don’t call me dude when you just had your dick up my ass!”

Matt wriggles his eyebrows. “No homo, though.” Nicky throws a pillow at him. Sadly, he misses. “Jokes aside, though, want to go out and get something to eat? I can drive you back to the court and you can pick the twins while I pick Dan. Are you on shift at Eden’s tonight?”

“Sounds good,” Nicky yawns. “And yeah, but it’s only opening shift and I’m off at midnight. Roland and Wymack get along far too well for my likings.”

“You say that about literally anyone who tells you to get more sleep.”

“Hey, I am technically in a bed, am I not?”

“Get dressed, asshole.”

Nicky can’t even get mad about the clothes thrown on his face, because they’re clean ones from Matt’s closet rather than those he was wearing when he got here, right after the closing shift at Eden’s and an embarrassing trip to the twin’s school still in a mesh shirt and black booty shorts. Jesus, he can only begin to imagine what rumors the Mothers Club has on him, right now.

Though he is by no mean a twink anymore, Matt’s shirt engulfs him, especially at the shoulders width and sleeves length. It’s a soft pullover in a nice pale yellow shade, with _Literal Ray of Sunshine_ written on the front in bold black letters, and it fits nicely with the pastel blue jeans that came with it. “I never pegged you for pastel guy.”

“Oh, Dan bought those for me.”

“I never pegged Dan for a girl with a pastel boyfriend kink.”

“Jesus,” Matt laughs. “How are you not a bad influence on the kids?”

Nicky runs both hands through his hair to give them a semblance of style that doesn’t look straight out of a music video for _I Just Had Sex_. “I am an amazing actor in front of any and all kinds of authority figures, which includes teachers and social workers.”

Matt grabs him by the neck of his shirt and physically throws him out of the door. Rude.

Going out with Matt is nice. It has all the soft feelings of a first date between teenagers, all blinding smiles and hand holding and nonchalant side-hugs, without any of the risks that come with pursuing something real. It’s like a fairytale that lasts until you reach the last page of the book, and then you can go back to the real world.

And Matt is definitely, absolutely, a hundred percent Prince Charming material. Except also with a brain, a fully developed personality and great morals about respecting women and partners in general.

“Dan struck fucking jackpot,” Nicky mutters, shoving a handful of fries in his mouth as he stares from the table at the counter where Matt is still waiting for their hamburgers to be ready.
So what, Nicky made them pull over to go to McDonald’s. What’s so wrong about it? He has kids in grade school, he’s been eating healthy foods full of greens ever since they came to live with him, he doesn’t even remember what junk food smells like and he thought it’d be impossible to forget the smell of frying oil.

Matt arrives with two cheeseburgers and Nicky snatches his before he’s even sat down. “The twins better never know about this, you get me?” He laughs. Easy for him, he’s not the one who’d have two junk food addicted little monsters. “I’m serious. Burgers and fucking you are my only occasional self-care concession so those two need to fuck off.”

“You know,—” Matt says, with that voice that makes Nicky stiffen because it’s the Serious Mom-Friend Tone, “—this is probably the first time I see you acting your age.”

It’s weird, to hear. When Nicky thinks of himself, it’s always in categories: he’s a gay, he’s a kinda-parent, he’s a cousin, he’s a man, he’s a Mexican-American, he’s an high-school drop out, he’s a retail worker. He’s never put much weight on his age, maybe because he’d hardly ever gotten to act as his peers since he came out. Being twenty-one is technically part of him, but honestly, how many twenty-years old are stuck in a situation like his? It’s really not representative, if even misleading, of him as a person.

Do twenty-one years old eat burgers and fries with their fuck buddies in secret from their little cousins because otherwise the little shits would demand to be included? Yeah, that sounds fair.

Nicky startles when he feels a touch to the corner of his mouth and Matt smiles at him. “You had some mayo there, you absolute mess.”

“You sure that was mayo?”

“Alright, new rule: you’re not allowed to be gross when I’m trying to eat.”

Nicky laughs and throws a fry to him. Someone chuckles in the boot behind Matt and Nicky looks up to meet the wrinkled eyes of an old lady. She nods slightly in Matt’s direction and winks.

Woah, that’s not embarrassing at all, isn’t it?

Matt blinks, confused, and turns to look at whatever left Nicky’s mouth hanging open. The old lady puts on an innocent smile, immediately, and Nicky gets hit by the realization that this could have been his life.

He could have had a boyfriend who liked pastel clothes and waited in the queue for him, who’d laugh at him and tease about his little cousins. He could have gone to college like Matt is doing and ended up eating junk food after class while complaining about essays and finals. Hell, he could have had old ladies thinking he scored the hottest dude in the block winking at him.

It’s mind blowing.

“Dude, you okay?” Matt asks, worried, and Nicky shakes himself off the fantasy.

He could have had that, but he didn’t. He’s somehow not as put off by the thought as he would have been a year ago, probably. He’s kinda grown fond of the two little shits.

“Yeah, just thinking,” he smiles.

Matt looks at him with his I Don’t Fucking Believe You look, but Nicky has to deal with Andrew’s glares daily so ignoring this is a walk in the park for him.
They shovel unhealthy food down their throats while talking about Dan and college and sexual escapades that at a certain point make Matt miss his mouth and almost shove a fry up his own nose, which in turn makes Nicky almost spit his coke all over the table. He’s pretty sure the staff there heaves a collective sigh when they finally leave.

The truck that Matt drives is a blue monstrosity with characteristics that Nicky could never in a million years understand, but it’s big and fast and disproves the theory of compensation about men and cars and dicks.

Matt cuffs him on the nape when he says so out loud. “I hope you check that mouth of yours around the kids.”

“Who do you take me for?”

“Your kids have mouths dirtier than a sailor’s and I’m going to get so many complaints by so many parents.”

Nicky bristles under Matt’s glare. “I didn’t teach them that!”

Dan rolls her eyes, but hands him a couple pieces of papers. “You still need to sign this, it’s to allow me to play the twins in official matches.”

Nicky frowns. “Aren’t they a bit too young?”

“They could be four, for all I care, have you seen Andrew in goal? He’s a goddamn rolling shutter. All I have to do is pair him up with Kevin during warm ups and he gets so pissed he closes the goal. As of now, only Kevin can score on him, and not as often as he’d like to.”

Which explains why the kid was so busy fuming he’d barely said hi to Nicky when he got there. In some way, it’s unsurprising that Andrew’s greatest motivator is spiting someone who annoyed him.

“And Aaron?”

“He’s a bit rough at the edges but he’s a fast learner,” Dan nods, pride clear in her voice. “I can shape him into a good back-liner, with some time. He probably won’t get to play in matches as soon as Andrew, but it won’t be too far behind.” She looks straight at him, an honest smile on her lips and twinkling eyes. “They’re good, Nicky. I’m not saying it to be nice, they really are. Andrew could be a prodigy, if he keeps training.”

The feeling that blooms in his chest is not something Nicky can identify immediately. It’s a mixture of pride and hopefulness and something else that twirls from the tip of his hair to his toes, all sparkled by the absolute certainty in Dan’s words.

He knows the family he left, he can only guess from snippets and tidbits what Tilda used to yell at her kids, so he can guess how much support the twins must have gotten in their first five years. And now here stands a professional placing the lines to shape them into champions.

His eyes are probably a bit lucid now, and when the fuck did his hand go and grabbed the chest of his shirt, he’d like to know. “Thank you.”
“Jesus,” Matt mutters. “That was really gay, bro.”

“Fight me, Boyd.” Matt grins. “Actually no, don’t fight me, you could snap me like a Kit-Kat.”

“No fighting in my gym, boys.” Dan calls, hip-checking Matt as she passes him by to the hoard of kids escaping from the locker rooms.

Aaron come out first, side by side with Kevin. It has been a recurring thing for Andrew to be one of the last to be ready to leave, and Nicky is trying not to worry about it.

Drew is lazy anywhere that isn’t the court, apparently, so Aaron has probably just gotten bored with waiting around for him. A bit of distance between them is normal, actually healthy. They don’t need to be always attached at the hip. This might actually be good for them.

Still, Nicky fidgets until he sees the second blond head appearing, accompanied by one of the high schoolers helping around in exchange for extracurricular credits.

By now, Aaron has launched himself into a recap of all that happened at practice, which includes Andrew aiming a ball to Kevin’s ankle that he’ll have to address, and Nicky is holding his bag on his shoulder.

Andrew is surprisingly fast in approaching them, considering how slow he’d been in changing out of his uniform. Maybe it’s giving him troubles? Nicky will have to check, but for now he just smiles and outstretches a hand to receive his bag too. “Hey there, little champion. Dan told me you might be getting in on official matches soon, that’s great!”

Andrew doesn’t surrender his bag. Instead, much to Nicky’s surprise, he grabs onto his fingers and holds on. “Drew?”

Red flags fill up Nicky’s brain. Andrew’s physical affection is something that he doesn’t often allows strangers to witness, and now they are in the middle of a crowd as he resorts to his go-to soothing touch. There’s something off in his expression too, it’s too blank and not frowning, and he looks tired. Nicky promises to check up on him tonight as soon as he’s back from work.

“Alright, buddies,” he says, trying not to show his internal panic. “What about some ice-cream to celebrate the news?”

That, of course, works. Andrew’s eyes snap upward and he nods once, forcefully enough to know that any failure in providing the sweet treat will not be tolerated.

“Let’s go then!”

Roland takes over the kids immediately after dinner as Nicky rushes to Eden’s. It’s a slow night being a weekday, so opening and doing the earliest hours is actually not too exhausting. Still, by the time midnight rolls around, Nicky is ready to call quits and collapse on his bed. He goes home with a new origami for the twins in his backpack with his change of clothes for the club, because he’s learnt the lesson since the last time the old man from second floor yelled slurs at him from the window.

When he gets in, he almost has a heart attack.
“Andrew!” he calls out to the figure sitting on the floor between the couch and the coffee table, illuminated only by one of those round and gummy night-lights that Abby got them for Christmas. “What are you doing up? It’s so late!”

He lets the backpack on the floor and hurries to get closer. In the darkness, it’s only when he’s already kneeling that he notices Andrew’s holding something to his chest.

“Drew,” Nicky calls lowly, trying to keep his voice as soft as possible. “Is that your Worry Eater?” Andrew’s arms clench tighter around the plush. “Andrew?”

It’s a fast gesture, faster than Nicky was expecting, when the plush is shoved into his face and he catches it instinctively before even realizing.

Andrew curls back into his position, now disappearing even more in the dark space.

There’s still paper and a black crayon on the table, so it’s probable Andrew wrote something for his toy to eat, something that woke him up in the middle of the night and made him hide in silence in a dark spot until his guardian came back home.

Nicky’s had some bad moments in his life, but he thinks he’s rarely ever been this scared. “What do you want me to do with it?”

Andrew’s shoulders shake in an aborted gesture, but his lips stay sealed. He’s non verbal again, which means Nicky will have to work around it. “Do you want me to keep the Worry Eater?”

A tremble, but then a nod. “Okay, and… Do you want me to take the worries you put inside?”

Another nod, more forceful.

“Want me to throw them away?”

A shake this time, frantic.

“Okay, okay, no throwing away, I get it!” He remembers Erik’s warning, he does, so he holds the doll up for Andrew to see. “Do you want me to…read them?”

Jesus, he’s dying to. He’s watching his kid trembling on the floor at the mere greenish light of a night lamp; he’s so ready to rip the doll apart to get to its contents. But on the other hand, Andrew has so much troubles trusting people and it took so long to get him to be comfortable with Nicky.

Andrew’s knees buckle, the moment visible even like that, and Nicky almost misses the minimal nodding of his head.

“Okay,” this is absolutely not okay. “I’ll read them now, alright? I’ll do it here with you, okay, I’m just turning the lights on.”

It’s a physical pain to stand up and leave Andrew to reach the switch, but when the lights turn on he at least gets a better look at the kid and is relieved to see that he doesn’t look injured physically, at least. For some reason, he’d feared…something. He doesn’t even know what himself.

“Do you want to get on the couch? It’s more comfortable.” A shake of the head. “That’s fine, we can just…stay on the floor. That’s perfectly okay, of course, whatever makes you feel safer.” Is herambling? He is definitely rambling.

He takes a deep breath.
Were the plushes always this heavy, he wonders.

Opening the zip and sticking his hand in are all actions that he can do while watching Andrew instead, but he can hardly gather anything except a steely stiffness.

He finds himself with a handful of tiny notes, which makes his heart drop. He counts four tickets, which is four too many in his book.

“I’m going to open them, okay?” No reaction. Shit.

Nicky picks one and struggles to uncurl it from the ball it was roughly reduced to. There are wrinkles all over the paper, which looked ripped from a bigger foil, and that makes even harder to recognize the letters written in black. Andrew’s calligraphy is still a child’s, the letters uneven and misshaped and in all kinds of dimensions, but they are unmistakable.

he touched my leg

Nicky’s heart sinks, like a stone hitting water, and just like the bottom of a lake his mind goes absolutely silent. It’s like he hit some kind of maximum possible and his brain is now shut down, refusing to elaborate the words into an emotion that it knows it won’t be able to deal with.

Someone touched Andrew. There might be a thousand of different explanations of this and it might refer to anyone, but Nicky’s first thought is a worst case scenario that makes his blood run cold.

“Andrew,” he tries to keep his voice firm, he does, he hopes Andrew doesn’t hear the crack in it. “Who touched you?” Andrew doesn’t answer, doesn’t move. “Andrew, I need to know.“

Andrew’s eyes move slowly, sluggish, and they rest on the closed tickets on the table in front of Nicky. Besides that, he doesn’t acknowledge Nicky’s words in any way.

Feeling like puking, Nicky moves to another note.

he stood really close to me in the bathroom before jean came in

No, fuck. No, fucking no, not this time. Nicky refuses to accept that God might be letting all this crap happen to Andrew. He might be a little shit at times, but he does not deserve all this continuous hurt.

“Andrew.” Nicky’s voice breaks, this time. He can’t do anything to cover it. He doesn’t know what to add, even. He just repeats. “Andrew.”

He grabs the third note with urgency. It’s neatly folded, more than all the others, it shows less anger and fear, seems older. The writing inside is just as childish, but less all over the place, more calm in a way.

i don’t like how drake looks at me

Drake. Nicky doesn’t immediately connect the name, but when he does he shivers.

He’s one of Dan’s, one of the high schoolers helping with Little Exy practice. The one who was besides Andrew when he came out of the locker room, the one Drew hurried up in leaving behind to go to Nicky.

“Goddamn bastard son of a bitch.” Andrew blinks. He doesn’t jerk to Nicky’s words, but he looks to his side with searching eyes. “Not you, Drew. Absolutely never, ever you. Sorry.”
Andrew doesn’t look impressed. He stares at the last note and Nicky really, really doesn’t want to read it. He’s terrified of finding out what it is.

His hands tremble so bad when he tries to open it.

*he calls me cute*

“Jesus Christ.” Nicky gulps. He can feel the tears falling from his eyes and he hates them because Andrew is the one who got through that and he’s not even crying and he’s, God, he’s seven, but here Nicky is and he should be of support and reassure him and instead he’s just crumbling in front of him. “Andrew, I’m—“

He’s sobbing in the middle of the word.

He was supposed to keep the twins safe! What did he take them for if this is what happens to them in his care? He was fucking Matt while this creep scared the hell out of Andrew!

It’s the ghost of a touch, rather than a real contact, but Nicky feels its coldness and he blinks the tears away to see tiny fingers resting just atop of his wrists.

Andrew’s face is still blank, but he’s staring at the way Nicky’s hands tremble and his fingers run along the blue impression of the veins like tracing a map. He goes all the way to the hem of the sleeve, and there he stops, grabbing on the fabric. He stares at his own hand as if questioning its actions for long minutes before looking up to meet his cousin’s look.

There’s a world of questions in those eyes.

Nicky brushes his other hand violently on his face, though he doesn’t indulge in the pain too long. He’ll punish himself later.

“Drew, I need you to listen to me carefully, okay?” It’s redundant, Andrew is already resting all his focus on him. “What Drake is doing is wrong. You are absolutely right in telling me, and I promise you I’ll make sure he will never touch you again. Can you trust me on that?”

Andrew’s eyes do that thing in which they go empty and blank for a moment, as if the life in them retreats deeper into him. It’s like watching a wild animal cowering in its den, only its silhouette barely discernible among the shadows. He returns, though, a few seconds later and he nods slowly, looking all in all like he can’t believe himself for what he’s doing.

Nicky wriggles his fingers to catch Andrew’s eyes. “Thank you, ‘Drew,” he says. “I need to ask you one thing more, though. Is this everything that Drake—“ he doesn’t miss how Andrew flinches, though minutely, at the name, “—did to you? Anything else?”

Andrew shrugs.

“Don’t,” Nicky can’t help it, how strong his voice comes out. “Don’t shrug it off. Don’t think it’s nothing. It’s important. Did anything else happen?”

Andrew stays still for a moment, lips still sealed. When he moves, it’s to pick up the black crayon and the leftover piece of paper on the table.

Nicky watches him hunch over as he scribbles in his big letters and he can’t help thinking, Jesus, he can’t even hold the pen correctly yet. It’s too big for his fingers to wrap around it.

He wants to kill Drake. No, he knows that if Dan were to give him the address of the guy, Nicky
would go there and end this with his own hands.

Andrew raises and places the crayon back on the table. When he leans back again, it’s like they cut his strings, like he doesn’t have a skeleton to hold him up anymore. He just slumps against the couch and he would probably just fall on the floor if it weren’t there.

Nicky peers at the paper.

talks about aaron lots. says we are special together. says i must be quiet or he will go to aaron.

Tilda, Riko and now this. Nicky is ready to set the whole town in flames, just to purge it of all these monsters.

Instead, he looks at Andrew again. “He will not touch Aaron, nor he will touch you again. Alright? I’ll talk with Dan immediately tomorrow.” Andrew shakes his head vehemently. “Andrew, we need to. It’s important. I can tell her, if you prefer, but she’ll need to ask you if I’m saying everything right.”

Now, Andrew is starting to shake again and Nicky panics. His brain works on its own and blurts out, “We can ask Renee to come with us.” It’s honestly unfair of him to offer her without her knowledge, but she’s the heroine in all the stories Andrew and Jean make up with dolls and plushes. “Drake could never get past her.”

It’s pure truth, which is probably why Andrew considers it. Nicky has seen a few of her matches on YouTube, she’s terrifying.

He kinda wants to tell her everything. She loves Andrew.

And Andrew, bless his heart, trusts her. Which in his book is probably an even higher deal than mere love.

Nicky’s sleeve tugs and he shakes himself. Andrew is staring at his own hand again, but he nods slowly and just as carefully Nicky moves his other hand to bring his fingers close to Andrew’s, not touching. “Thank you,” he says. “I’m sorry I didn’t notice sooner. I should have.”

At this, Andrew’s blank expression cranks up in his usual frown. He shakes his head, once and then twice, but doesn’t elaborate. Nicky doesn’t think he’d get anything out of him now so he just sighs.

His phone says it’s two in the morning already. It took them that long to get through the whole ordeal, but it feels much longer. They should probably go to sleep, but Nicky’s afraid of the nightmares waiting for them.

Oh, fuck it. He’s not going to win Parent of the Year anyway.

“Hey, Andrew. What do you say we bake some cookies?” He strives to smile at least a bit.

Andrew looks up to him, then taps his black crayon on the paper to leave a few dots on the white.

Nicky wonders when did he learn all these nuances of Andrew Speak. “Of course we’re going to make chocolate chips, what are we, amateurs?”

His face is still sticky with salt and snot and Andrew is still silent and shaking slightly, but they get up and collect themselves into the kitchen. They just need a way to live through the next few hours.
Nicky wakes up on the floor of the kitchen, with his back against the cabinet beside the over and a warm weight against his side. When he looks down, Andrew is wrapped in his jacket, the one he hadn’t even took off the previous night, and is snoring a bit. His hair is a mess but is hand is still holding onto Nicky’s shirt.

Aaron is also staring at them from the door. “Why are you on the floor?” he asks, expression scrunched up in confusion.

Nicky blinks the sleep out of his eyes. Tentatively, he reaches for something high on the table and pulls it down with a grunt. He offers Aaron to plate. “A cookie?”

Aaron is seven. Of course that’s enough to distract him.

Andrew is still in silent mode, which Aaron seems to have accepted remarkably easily just as the news that he’d be going to school alone. To be fair, all Nicky had to tell him was that Andrew would absolutely need him to take notes for the both of them or he was going to be left behind.

He watches Aaron march into school like a little soldier on a mission to save the whole humanity.

“He loves you a lot,” he says to Andrew, who’s staring also from the backseat. The kid just shrugs. Liar. Nicky knows he’s happy.

He turns the car around and in barely ten minutes they are at the Wild Fox. Matt sees them coming in and frowns, surely because of the single kid, but Nicky shakes his head. “I need Renee to come with me to your place.”

Matt, unsurprisingly, nods before he’s even asked, “What is this about?” Nicky is lucky to have people like him in his life.

“Where is Renee?”

“Nicky.” He turns to see her walking through the entrance door, helmet of her bike under her arm and head tilt slightly to a side. Though surprised, she doesn’t miss saying hello to Andrew and offering him a hand as soon as she’s close enough. Nicky can’t bring himself to feel offended when his cousin immediately grabs it and lets go of his. If Renee is what makes Andrew feel safe, he will give her to him. “Is something the matter?”

Wordlessly, Nicky hands her Andrew’s notes. It’s not that he doesn’t trust Matt, but there’s a few people around already and he doesn’t want to speak about this out loud. “He gave them to me last night. We’re giving them to Dan.”

Renee’s expression grows darker as she reads. Nicky can see the realization hitting her as her lips lose their smile and her bright eyes somehow manage to erase all the light from the room to turn into vicious black holes. She looks up to Nicky, waiting, and he gulps. “Andrew would like for you to come with us.”
It’s an unspoken knowledge that Renee is a protector and a defender. She knows and she’s okay with it. The implications of the situation they’re in is surely not lost on her because she hands back the notes and then turns to Andrew.

He watches her kneel on the floor with attentive eyes, even when she lets go of his hand. She opens her bag and digs in until she pulls out two pieces of white cloth, something similar to gauze from what Nicky can see. Careful and silent, she makes a display for Andrew’s eyes alone of how nimbly her fingers work to secure the bandages around her knuckles.

“Wait, you’re not going to beat up Dan, are you? Nicky? Why is she getting ready to punch the f-out of someone?”

Oh, so that’s what she’s doing. Nicky can’t say he’s against it.

“Not Dan,” he can just bring himself to say. Renee finishes to secure his second hand and then offers it to Andrew again. He grabs it with less hesitance than before, and Nicky sees him running a finger along the cover to test it. “You sure?”

The voice that replies to him is not even Renee’s. It belongs to someone else, someone darker and with no God to answer to. “Yes.”

“Okay.”

They leave.

Dan stares at the notes for much longer than Nicky expected. She’s a fierce woman, a warrior, a commander at heart; hesitance and double thinking do not belong to her more than cowardice and cruelty. But in front of those four broken pieces of a child’s scared secret, her shoulders drop and her face goes white.

“I hired him,” she mutters, only for Nicky’s ears because Renee and Andrew sit on the couch on the other side of the coffee table and she’s sunk on the floor when she’d realized this was going to be bad news. “I let him close to all those kids.”

There are millions of justifications that could be offered — it’s not your fault, you couldn’t have known, don’t blame yourself for his actions —, but, honestly, they wouldn’t make her feel better. Nicky knows it, they’re not working for him either. Instead, he crosses his arms from where he stands on his feet just to her side.

“I know this is not evidence,—” he says, “—but I couldn’t care less. I don’t want him anywhere close to Andrew again. Dan, if I have to—“

“I’m calling the police on this motherfucker, Hemmick. You think I’m going to waste time thinking about this while that asshat keeps working in my court? Like Hell. My responsibility goes to the kids and in all of my contracts is stated that I have the right to fire any and all asses if I receive a single complaint from a child.”

She already has her phone out. Nicky is not surprised to find out she’s calling the cops first, so he moves to sit on Andrew’s other side. Renee’s hand is still firmly holding onto his.

Dan’s voice clips out the accuses that none of them had yet to say out loud. Nicky flinches.
The cops arrive less than twenty minutes later.

Aaron has two copies of all notes for the day already when Nicky and Andrew go to pick him up after school.

“Kat helped me copy them during the breaks,” he says, proud. “They’re color coded.”

In practice, that means that Aaron randomly underlined and circled things in different colors with no actual code whatsoever, therefore resulting in a mess of rainbow scribbled notes. Andrew doesn’t look really impressed, but Renee compliments Aaron and he forgets to ask why she’s with them, why she dines with them and why she ends up spending the night in Nicky’s room as he takes the couch once again.

Dan calls him at ten the next morning, while they are enjoying the Saturday drawing and slowly coaxing Andrew back to talking with gentle questions about ice-cream and sweets and books.

“He tried to run when the cops showed up at his place to ask for questions,” she says, dry. “Nicky, they found pedopornographic material in his phone and computer.”

Nicky is not sure whether he sat down or just coincidentally fell on the couch. He knows Renee slips the phone from his hand when it’s clear he’s not listening to Dan anymore and takes up the conversation.

Andrew stares at him from the floor, stiff, braced for the impact. Nicky hates that he’s so ready for the world to disappoint him. “They got him, ‘Drew. He’ll never come near you again.”

“He’s going to prison,” Renee adds, having hung up on Dan.

Once more, Andrew doesn’t answer. He looks to the both of them, then slowly turns back to his drawing.

He switches his crayons, though, and lets the black one down to pick up yellow instead.

Nicky is not so stupid as to believe what happened didn’t hurt Andrew already, somehow. He can tell by the dark bags under his eyes, by the way he scurries to Renee whenever she’s around, how sometimes he looks at Aaron as if to make sure he’s stilt here, still okay. He can tell by how no amount of reassurance has managed to make Andrew go back to Little Exy practice.

Nicky can’t stand it, so he calls Abby.

“You told me once that you have a good friend who’s a psychotherapist,” he says, no time to waste. “Does she work with kids?”

“Well, she mostly works with teens and young adults, but, yes, she’s had lots of child patients. Would you like me to give you her number? I could also ask her directly, I’m sure she’d find the time.”

Nicky watches Andrew on the living room carpet, drawing once again in black. His pictures are
mostly colored stuff that he stares at and then scrawls over until nothing’s left to discern under the
tangle of dark lines.

“Yeah,” he says, and then, more softly as to not be heard. “Please.”

Betsy Dobson looks like a mom. Nicky couldn’t describe her otherwise.

She welcomes them in the waiting room of her studio wearing a bright yellow skirt and jacket over
a black blouse and her dark hair is pulled back in a chignon so that every wrinkle around her eyes
is perfectly visible, like the dimple in her cheek. Her voice when she greets them is soft and sweet
like hot chocolate, velvety, but not overly so.

She’s nothing like the therapist at the conversion camp, and he lets out a breath he had been
holding since he called Abby.

Andrew stares at her for a long while before accepting to go inside, still firmly holding onto
Nicky’s finger.

Betsy gestures for them to sit where they prefer and Andrew picks the couch which is separated
from the therapist’s chair by a short table with paper and crayons. Nicky can see where this is
going to head to.

It’s a first session, so not much is discussed. Nicky already gave Betsy the rundown of the events
on the phone, so she mainly spends the time speaking to Andrew about all kinds of normal stuff.
Andrew sticks to non-verbal, but she’s quick in adapting her questions so they can be answered
with a simple yes or no.

“You seem to get along well with your brother,” she says after a while, smiling.

Andrew stops digging black lines over the drawing of a blue dog he’d done. He shrugs.

Nicky stays quiet. By the time the hour is over, he’s ready to cry because Andrew hasn’t met
Betsy’s eyes during the whole session, after that first time when they were introduced. He has only
an idea of how much therapy is going to cost and Betsy’s price was a favor in Abby’s name; he’s
terrified of what it will take to pay the full cost of another doctor.

He thanks her quietly when they’re getting ready to leave, and she hands him her card. “For when
Andrew is ready to see me again,” she says, unperturbed by today’s silence. “He doesn’t have to
talk to me, of course, but I’d recommend not letting more than a week pass.”

Nicky is not sure he understands how she’s so sure Andrew will want to return, but four days later
he finds himself receiving a drawing where black, though prominent, is actually part of the figure.

“This is a pretty bee, Andrew,” he says, nodding, though a bit confused since Andrew had been
perfectly speaking until a few minutes ago as they were eating. “Does it mean something?”

Andrew sends him an annoyed look. “Bee.”

“Yes, I can see it is a bee?”

“Bee.”
“Is that supposed to mean—“

“Bee! Bee, Bee, Bee, Bee—“

It takes him half an hour to realize Betsy Dobson was wearing a bee’s colors when they met her. “Wait, Bee as in Betsy? You want to see Doctor Dobson again?”

Andrew’s anger, as fast as it came, recedes into a simple frown as he nods. “Bee.”

No lie, Nicky could cry tears of joy right now. He doesn’t though. He absolutely does not. “You know, that’s a nice nickname. I’ll call her tomorrow morning and see if she can meet us on Wednesday again, how does it sound?”

Satisfied, Andrew leaves with his drawing.

Nicky wonders if anything can shake this woman, because not only Betsy Dobson looks absolutely unsurprised by his call — and look at that, she just has the same slot from last time available, isn’t that a coincidence? — but she also doesn’t blink an eye when Andrew tugs at Nicky’s sleeve to make him sit down again on the couch in the waiting room.

“You—“ he hesitates, trying not to let his anxiety show. “You’re okay going on your own?”

He wants, badly, to phrase it you don’t want me there, but he can hear the whine in the words, the implicit accusation and hurt feelings, and he doesn’t want to pressure Andrew in allowing him in his sessions. He just wants Drew to feel comfortable.

And Andrew does nod at him with remarkably little hesitation. Well, okay then.

It’s the longest hour of his life.

When the door finally opens again, Andrew all but runs out and against Nicky’s leg to hide his face there. Before he can panic, Bee appears too and with a gentle smile on her lips. “We spoke a tiny bit today,” she assured. “We’re still getting to know each others. You have a very smart boy on your hands, indeed.”

Nicky smiles at the compliment. “He really is, Ma’am.”

As they are leaving, Andrew turns back to stare one last time.

Three weeks later, Andrew enters the room as says, “Hello, Bee.” She doesn’t even blink before answering with a greeting in kind and Nicky watches them go into the study and thinks, okay.

Maybe therapy is not for him. Maybe he gets flashbacks and has nightmares at the mere thought of talking with Bee himself. But he is one person and Andrew is another, and for Andrew therapy seems to work. Betsy Dobson seems to work.

What’s a couple shifts more, after all? Bee really asks for little money from them, thanks to Abby. They can make it.
Nicky has to make it.

With the festivities close by, Nicky finds himself cooking something Mexican to bring to the Wild Fox for an impromptu dinner. Alvarez will also be present, so he’s making sure the adult versions are all very powerful, while the children’s are all very much bland and not spicy.

He won’t deny his heart makes a somersault in his chest when he turns and spots Aaron on the door, holding his own Worry Eater to his chest.

*Shit. Shit, shit, please, God, no.*

“Hey, buddy,” he says, kneeling on the floor and trying really hard not to freak out on the spot. “What do you have there?”

Aaron torches the plush in his arms, but doesn’t offer him. Instead he gets closer enough for Nicky to put his hands on his shoulders. “Why isn’t Andrew coming to practice anymore?”

*Oh.* He hadn’t thought of explaining to Aaron what happened to his brother, mainly because how do you explain something like that to a kid?

“Aaron,—” Jesus, this is harder than he’d thought. “—I don’t think Andrew is going to come back to Little Exy for a while. He’s not feeling like it.”

“He’s sad,” Aaron retorts. “Sometimes he’s not, but sometimes he is. I don’t know why.” Again, he torches the toy’s ears in his hands. “Nicky, is it my fault? Did I do something?”

“What? No. Of course not, buddy. What makes you think that?”

Aaron shrugs. “He never practices with me anymore. He doesn’t want to study with me. He always makes his drawings weird. And—” he hesitates, “—he doesn’t let me hug him when we sleep anymore.”

“Oh. Oh, Aaron.” Nicky sighs. This is not surprising, but he should have thought about it first. “Listen, it’s nothing that you did or said, and I can assure you Andrew is not mad at you. It’s just that… You see, something bad almost happened. It didn’t, but it could have, and Andrew is trying to… deal with it.”

“What bad thing?” Aaron asks, his frown coloring with worry immediately.

“I can’t be the one to tell you,” Nicky evades. “Andrew will, when he feels ready to. In the meanwhile, we need to show him how much we care by respecting what he says he needs from us. And I know it’s hard, but sometimes that also means space.”

Aaron seems to think it through. “For how long?”

*Don’t I wish I know, buddy.* “I have no idea, Aaron. We need to be patient and wait for Andrew. Think you can do that?”

There’s reluctance written all over his face, but in the end Aaron nods, and he looks a bit relieved now that he knows he’s not the major cause of his brother’s obvious distress. “Can I still hug him?” he asks and Nicky hesitates.
Andrew is still very much physical in his own way, but it’s almost always instances in which he is the one to initiate the contact and it’s clear that he doesn’t appreciate being touched first. But he still seeks hugs and hand holding and a side against which to take a nap.

“Maybe?” Nicky settles for, in the end. “You should probably ask him for permission first. Like, Andrew, I’d like to hug you, may I?” It honestly sounds a bit weird, what with how close the twins have always been, but this is the only solution Nicky can see, so they’ll have to make do.

For a moment, Aaron mulls it through, but in the end he nods as if to say it pleases him and Nicky smiles, before patting him on the side. “Okay, now hurry up and get changed, we have to head out soon.”

As Aaron obeys, he finishes placing all the food in the containers and then goes to get changed himself. As soon as he’s ready, he stops by the twins’ room, ready to question what’s taking so long, but he stops himself just in time.

They kids are locked in a stalemate of some kind in which they’re standing in front of each others and staring intensely. Aaron looks serious, but Andrew even more. He seems to think, before finally letting his head bob in a stiff nodding motion.

The moment he’s done, Aaron is already at his neck, squeezing tight. Nicky can see his lips moving and he knows he’s saying something, but he can’t catch what.

Andrew doesn’t answer, but after the first five seconds with his arms stiff along his sides, he brings his hands behind his brother’s back and squeezes a bit in return.

If Nicky wishes on a shooting star for a year without tragedies on his kids — and really, who cares about himself, he’d rather be the one who gets hurt if there’s really no way to avoid it altogether —, that’s his business, fuck off, Boyd.

When Wymack pours him some wine, he cheers to Betsy Dobson and Renee Walker.
Also known as, Agap unsubtly calls out this annoying school practice. And Nicky freaks out. Again.

This is unashamed fluff to soothe the hurt from the past chapters.

There’s moments in everyone’s life when you stop and wonder, *is this all I get?* Nicky had those too, but he’d always known better than to voice them out loud because even in his mind his father turns to him every time, with a disgusted expression, and says, *you deserve less.*

Lately, though, the question has changed to him and had burst out of his lips and from his hands and in every of his muscles and organs and inches of skin. *Is this all the twins get?*, he wonders, and immediately he says, *no.*


“Good morning to you too, Nicky,” Renee chirps joining them behind the counter. “Has be been like this for long?”

Matt shrugs as he starts working on her usual pre-shift cappuccino. “Since yesterday afternoon when the twins told him it’s *Bring A Parent To School* day on Friday,” Nicky groans from where he’s still face-planted on the counter. “He’s freaking out.”

“I’m not *freaking out.*” Renee picks her drink and turns to watch him from above the rim of the cup. “I am simply stating the obvious, which is that life is screwing me over again and she’s even more hung than Matt.”

Renee snorts in her cup. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Excuse me, it can. I’m going to embarrass the twins for the rest of their lives.” He sighs. “It’s going to be full of lawyers and doctors and I’m going to go there and explain what a bartender is to seven years old, ugh.”

“So what?” Matt shrugs. “They’re children, Nicky. They don’t really care what you do, each one of them is too happy of getting a chance to brag about their mom or dad.”

“Yes,—” Nicky turns his head to him, “—and the twins will be the only ones who don’t have either.” Matt’s expression sours, but Nicky doesn’t let the regret settle there long. Instead, he huffs and pulls himself up. “Whatever, that’s a problem for Friday Me. Present Me needs to hurry up and pick up the twins.”

“Today is Wednesday, Andrew has his appointment with Betsy, doesn’t he?” Renee offers, picking up the topic change and she does with her apron. “How is that going?”

“Beats me,” Nicky shrugs. “But I swear Andrew gets so excited to go to her sessions. It’s weird. I
think she might be snuggling sweets to him, actually.”

Matt takes Nicky’s apron from him. “Do you think he’s talking to her?”

“Oh, I know he is. Last time he was still chattering when she opened the door after their time was up. It was the weirdest thing, I thought I was in the Twilight Zone or something.”

“Asshole.” Matt chuckles as Nicky moves around the counter, jacket on already, and picks his shoulder bag from the floor. “Don’t forget Aaron’s practice ends early today!”

“You two mongrels are so fucking domestic,” Wymack growls, emerging from the back. “When the fuck did you become Nicky’s wife, Matt?”

Matt pouts. “Hey, Dan told me to remind him fourteen times this morning. It’s not my fault my girlfriend coaches his kid, okay?”

Nicky swoons dramatically. “Matthew! Am I just a kept mistress, to you? Oh, my poor heart, it’s breaking!”

“Get out of my sight, Hemmick!”

“See you tomorrow, Boss!”

Betsy’s study is luckily not too far away from Dan’s gym so Nicky can just ride there and pick Andrew from his session before picking Aaron up from Little Exy practice and then they can all go home.

Nicky’s doing more lunch-afternoon shifts at the Wild Fox, so he can accompany the kids to school. Abby can get them to practice and to Betsy’s, so Nicky picks up Kevin and Katelyn when they’re all done with the respective sports and gives them a ride home. It’s a bit tiring because it leaves Nicky’s sleep schedule broken in two slots, in the morning when the kids are in class and in the evening before he goes to Eden’s, but it allowed him to call Roland only a handful of times, when he didn’t want to bring the kids to sleep in the apartment above the club, and that’s one expense less.

Also, he wants to be there when the kids come home.

Once again, Andrew comes out of Betsy’s room while holding on her hand. It’s a recent development, but it lifts Nicky’s heart to see. “Hey, ‘Drew. How was today?”

Andrew frowns at him. “Mr. Gibson gave us a doggerel to memorize today.”

“Oh dear,” Nicky hated those at school. “Do you need help with it?”

“Poor old lady, she swallowed a fly. / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

“Poor old lady, she swallowed a spider. / It squirmed and wriggled and turned inside her. / She swallowed the spider to catch the fly. / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

Poor old lady, she swallowed a bird. / How absurd! She swallowed a bird. / She swallowed the
bird to catch the spider, / She swallowed the spider to catch the fly, / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

"Poor old lady, she swallowed a cat. / Thank of that! She swallowed a cat. / She swallowed the cat to catch the bird. / She swallowed the bird to catch the spider. / She swallowed the spider to catch the fly, / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

"Poor old lady, she swallowed a dog. / She went the whole hog when she swallowed the dog. / She swallowed the dog to catch the cat, / She swallowed the cat to catch the bird, / She swallowed the bird to catch the spider. / She swallowed the spider to catch the fly, / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

"Poor old lady, she swallowed a cow. / I don’t know how she swallowed a cow. / She swallowed the cow to catch the dog, / She swallowed the dog to catch the cat, / She swallowed the cat to catch the bird, / She swallowed the bird to catch the spider, / She swallowed the spider to catch the fly, / I don’t know why she swallowed a fly. / Poor old lady, I think she’ll die.

"Poor old lady, she swallowed a horse. / She died, of course."

Nicky blinks. His brain takes a good ten seconds to register everything that came out of Andrew’s mouth in Andrew’s monotone voice and accept that, yes, that was all Andrew.

He lifts a finger in a waiting motion. “Okay, if we ignore how creepy that rhyme is and why would Mr. Gibson teach you that of everything he could,—“ he hesitates, “—did you say he gave it to you today?” Andrew frowns harder and nods. “How did you learn it already?!"

“We wanted to talk to you about that, actually,” Bee interjects, smiling gently. “I was also surprised so we made a couple experiments. Andrew?”

Andrew stares at her flatly. “On the topic of its immortality, enough has been said. On the idea of the soul, instead, this has to be told: defining what it is would require a totally divine and widespread exposition, while saying what it looks like is proper of a human and shorter exposition.” He frowns. “I still don’t know what it means.”

Betsy smiles down at him. “It’s quite alright if you don’t, Andrew, that was a philosophy book from my college years.” She looks at Nicky, politely not mentioning the way his jaw is resting on her floor at the moment. “From what I could see, I think Andrew is one of those rare people who posses an eidetic memory. It means he has the capability of remembering anything he pays attention to, in perfect detail, even for the rest of his life. It is quite amazing.”

“Are you serious?” Nicky looks down to Andrew. “You never mentioned being that good at memorizing stuff?”

Andrew shrugs. “I thought Aaron was just dumb.”

“Andrew.”

“Anyway,” Betsy adds. “We made another test. Andrew, what did you do on the eleventh of March last year?”

Andrew blinks. “Nicky put his wallet in the washing machine with his trousers.”

“Hey!”

“And we had waffles for breakfast, with banana and chocolate.”
Well, that’s amazing. A bit terrifying, but also undoubtedly amazing. Of course Nicky has no idea whether that’s right or not, but he is a hundred percent sure that Andrew wouldn’t lie, so there’s that.

Oh, Aaron is going to blow a fuse when they’ll start having tests to study for.

He smiles down. “Andrew, you’re incredible. Guess school is going to be a walk in the park for you, uh?”

Andrew shrugs, but he looks quite pleased with the notion that he won’t have to work too hard. Lazy little monster.

Bee chuckles. “Yes, we talked about it.” She shakes her head. “It was a productive session, this discovery aside. Andrew might ask you to sit in with us, next week, actually. Would it be possible for you to come?”

Well, he’ll have to move a few things around, but it shouldn’t get him into too many troubles. “Sure, absolutely.” He looks at his cousin. “No pressure, though, okay? If you change your mind at any time, just tell me.”

The thing that sometimes worries Nicky is how stubborn the kids are. But this time Andrew nods seriously and it’s a bit reassuring.

They part with Bee shortly after and Nicky helps Andrew into the car.

“Wait, what’s this stain on your shirt? Is it chocolate?!”

“… We’re gonna be late to pick up Aaron.”

“Andrew!”

They are almost late to pick up Aaron, which means Nicky arrives panting and Andrew quietly glowing because lateness means avoiding Kevin’s I’m So Disappointed In You look. It also means they get Aaron’s I’m So Disappointed In You look.

“Sorry, buddy,” Nicky tries, and Aaron huffs as if he’s had to wait hours.

Dan ruffles his hair. “Wanna tell them?”

Nicky knows, rationally, Dan wouldn’t be laughing if this was a bad news, but he can’t help the tiny shiver he gets. “What?”

Aaron opens into a beaming smile. “I’mma regular!”

Alright, this is within Nicky’s range of sport knowledge. “What?! That’s amazing! Gimme a five!”

And just like that, Aaron returns to the disappointed look. “What?”

“We don’t do high fives,” the kid has the guts to drawl, annoyed as if Nicky wasn’t the one who taught him how to use a shower head. “We do fist bumps.”

“Oookay,” Nicky drawls right back. “Can I have a fist bump, then, or are you too cool for old people like me, now?”
Aaron actually takes time to think about that! Little shit. “Whatever.” He offers his bump like the Queen of England expecting a kiss on the knuckles. Wow.

Nicky huffs as he returns it. Aaron then hesitates a moment before offering to Andrew too. Andrew stares at the hand for almost half a minute, which shows all of the patience Aaron has and daily refuses to display, before accepting the gesture.

“Give them a few years and they’ll have Too Cool For School written all over their papers,” Dan jokes, shaking her head, and Nicky glares at her because God forbids the twins hear her and actually think she’s got the right idea. “Anyway, the season won’t start until almost a month yet, but Aaron is definitely our best back-liner.” Conspiratorially, she adds, “Kevin approves.”

“Oh my gosh, Kevin approves!”

Dan slaps him on the arm. “Keep my player well fed, Hemmick. I need him on top form.”

“Is that your priority?!”

Aaron blabbers on and on about his spot on the line for the whole drive home. Nicky offers the occasional noise of surprise or agreement when necessary, but the only real contribution to the conversation is one word from Andrew when Aaron asks him if he thinks he’ll start playing again before the season begins.

It's a no.

Aaron takes it with just a dejected hum, before throwing himself back into narrating about how he actually managed to steal the ball from Kevin, once. He only off-handedly admits he also got a yellow card for that move, and Nicky chuckles.

They fix dinner together. It’s a new tradition that Nicky is trying to build up. He will have to pick up more shifts soon, but he’ll try to keep being home for this at the very least, because the twins seem to feel better when they have a routine to stick to. Part of the routine is still, sadly, trying to convince Andrew to eat his greens and Aaron to stop trying to find out which part of which animal is the meat he’s eating.

After dinner, Nicky washes the dishes as the kids watch cartoons in TV or do their homework. Aaron discovers Andrew’s newly found talent and proceeds to sulk because it takes him an hour and all of Nicky’s help to learn the damn song. Which gets creepier every time Nicky hears it, no way around it. Andrew lays on the sofa reading a book and, Nicky suspects, sometimes sends his brother a smug grin or something because Aaron suddenly bristles every now and then.

By the time the kids are in bed, Nicky is ready to call it quits and knowing he only has three hours of sleep before having to get ready for Eden’s sits heavily in his chest. Wymack has already threatened repercussions if he doesn’t switch his schedule around soon enough.

As he lays in his bed, though, the idea of Friday sneaks up on him again and he buries his face in the pillow to groan.

It’s not that he cares about what people think of him. He’s just very aware of it, but he doesn’t lose his sleep because of an handful of Mrs. Simmons’. What worries him, truly, is just that whatever he’ll say will be unavoidably linked to the twins and he really doesn’t want to embarrass them. Up
until now, neither of them had seemed to have any kind of issue with how different their family is from any of their classmates, but Nicky is not sure of how aware they are of the fact that other kids don’t spend half their nights at home and half in a room above a night club.

He thinks of way of spinning the story around, even briefly considers putting to use the astronaut costume from last Halloween, but he knows Andrew enough to be sure that he’d never speak to him again if he lies so blatantly in front of him. Damn the kid’s ethic.

He doesn’t get much sleep before his alarm rings, and Roland knocks on their door half an hour later as he’s still trying to get into a pair of awfully thigh red leather pants. His white crop top says, *You can call me Baby, Daddy*, and usually stays buried very deep in his closet where he hopes none of the twins will ever accidentally find it.

Roland arches a brow at it.

“Listen, I’m living off tips these days, okay?”

“You can go out in full Drag gear for all I care, just get out of here. I need to sleep and I’m pretty sure your couch has my body shape imprinted in the cushions.”

Nicky smacks a wet kiss on his temple before he runs out.

Needless to say, he’s got bags for days under his eyes, as he enters at the Wild Fox. He spent the morning worrying about Friday, which Roland has cheerfully reminded him is *tomorrow*, and so the other sleep slot of his schedule had gone by.

Wymack takes a look at him and cusses. “How many times are we going to have this talk, brat?”

“We could stop now, if you want; I’m perfectly fine with it.”

“Don’t give me lip, boy,” Wymack growls and Nicky is only slightly terrified when the man grabs him by the arm and drags him to the back. Matt, the traitor, waves him happily as they pass by.

“Are you going to kill me and hide my corpse in the dough? Because I’ll let you know I probably taste awful and I have to children at home.”

He only receives an unimpressed glance for his performance. Instead, Wymack pulls off the shelves a couple bags of flours, sugar and so many other supplies. “You know what’s the awful truth of *Bring Your Parent To School, Nicky?”*

Nicky shrugs. “It fuels an early development of classism in children and causes lots of parents stress and anxiety?”

Wymack pulls out a weight scale and starts pouring flour on it. “What’s Aaron’s favorite color?”


Sugar. “Andrew’s favorite food?”

“You know as well as me that if it were for him, he’d live off double chocolate chips cookie dough ice-cream.”
From somewhere, appear some eggs that end up in the bowl with the rest of the stuff. “Can they tie their shoes?”

“Andrew can but is too lazy, Aaron doesn’t want to admit he keeps getting confused, so they both would walk around with their laces stuck in the sides, rather than asking for help. What’s with the interrogation?”

Wymack places his mixing bowl on the table rather forcefully and then places his open palms there too. “The worst thing of those days is, Hemmick, that you’ll see some parents who’d start floundering at any question I just asked you. Some of them will arrive late and you’ll see kids eyeing the door anxiously scared that they won’t come. And pray that they do, because I’ve seen twice the look of a child who’s parents forgot or were stuck at work and couldn’t make it and, trust me, you don’t want to see that.”

Nicky tries to swallow, tries to think of something to say, but Wymack pushes both the dough-in-the-make and the spoon in his hands and goes to gather another set of utensils.

“You’re a good parent, Nicky, even if you don’t call yourself that,” he says, gruff, as he gets started on a second batch. “You care about your kids, and that’s all they ask from you. You’ll show up there with a smile and it will already be more than anybody else would have done for them, even their own mother, and we both know that. They don’t care about how much you earn or how prestigious your job is; they care that you sleep five hours per night to make them breakfast and read them bedtime stories. That is what they want to show off.”

_You. Will not. Cry. Come on, Nicholas Esteban Hemmick, not in front of your boss!_

He doesn’t. His voice is just slightly wet when he mutters, “Thank you.”

Wymack grunts, which is his usual version of anybody else’s _you’re welcome_, and goes back to mixing. Finally, Nicky sticks the spoon in his bowl and mimics him. “So,” he tries anyway, because the silence is still a bit awkward, for him. “You really think all I need to do is smile and be honest and it will be okay?”

“Hell no, you’re going to be a mess. That’s why we’re making cookies.”

Nicky stops and he’s not sure whether it’s because he’s offended or because of the picture in his head. “Wait, are you saying these cookies for the twins’ classmates?”

Wymack throws him a bag of cinnamon powder. “It’s called _strategy._”

“It’s called _bribe,_” but Nicky is smiling, and this time it is real. “I thought you just said tomorrow is all about love and showing how much I care for the kids.”

“It is,” Wymack huffs, dropping chocolate chips in his bowl like it’s a downpour of sweets. “It’s also about showing Dentist Carl, on the Seventh, where he can shove his occlusions.”

Nicky was wrong. Friday can’t be harder than keeping the twins from spying what’s on the covered trays he is bringing home from work.

“It’s not for you, okay? Stop it. Andrew. Andrew, I’m going to trip if you don’t let go of my leg. Andrew, we talked about the five seconds rule, you know _that’s not how it works._”
Aaron stares at him from where he’s holding the door of their apartment open. “Is it for tomorrow?” he asks, then his face goes a bit blaneker a bit more hesitant. “You remember about tomorrow.”

He phrases it like a fact. Like he wouldn’t accept another answer, but already knows that’s what he’ll most likely get.

Nicky tries to find a way to hug him despite the trays in his arms. “Of course I remember, Aaron,” he tries to wink. “I might be too old to know about high-fives, but I’m not completely gone, yet.”

“You forgot the lights of the car on,” Andrew offers from still hanging on his leg.

Nicky runs out to check with the trays still in his hands, because he doesn’t trust the twins not to try and climb the table for a taste.

After dropping the kids for their first lesson, Nicky comes back home and spends a full hour checking out what to wear. No matter what the twins’ teacher said, he discards the option of wearing his work clothes immediately, and shoves his cursed tank top back into the darkest part of his wardrobe. Most of his nicest clothes have the goal to pick up a man, though, and they make his ass look amazing and his shoulders wide but they won’t work on impressing kids that are barely older than toddlers in his mind.

He’s not even ashamed when he picks his phone and calls Matt.

“Dude, can you breath for me?” the man on the other side of the phone says, and Nicky realizes he’s been blabbering non stop for almost three minutes. “Thanks. Now, Dan is telling me to relay that she is coming over to save the day. I’m guessing this means more pastel colors.”

“Pastels are perfect! Kids fucking love pastels, right? They’re kids, for fuck’s sake, they spend most of their life coloring all the stuff they can color or thinking about coloring stuff they’re not allowed to color.”

“Man. I need you to remember that you’re going to speak in front of a class of babies. Put on the brain-mouth filter again.”

“Bold of you to assume I have one.”

“Nicky!”

Dan appears at his door ten minutes later, which prompts Nicky to frown. “Did you have clothes for me on hand?”

“Bitch, my fuckbuddy and I prepared clothes for you yesterday and I was waiting for your call with my car keys in hand since thirty minutes, already.”

She has a bag with her that opens on a pastel pink short-sleeved button up and soft pastel jeans. There’s even a pair of white sneakers in his size, and how the fuck did she know that?! “Do you
have a white T-shirt? A clean white T-shirt.”

“I’m not a barbarian, thank you.”

“Good, wear it and put on the open shirt. Roll the hem of the jeans above the ankles, okay? You have some kind of cologne?”

“Does deodorant count?”

Dan pulls a bottle of perfume from her bag and sprays him with it without even answering. He coughs.

“You have thirty minutes, Hemmick. Gallop, gallop.”

“Do you say that to Matt when you’re fucking, too?”

“Nicky!”

You need to calm the fuck down.

He looks good, he smells good. He’s got the cookies ready in a bag to deliver the fatal blow, to quote Wymack, and he’s actually ten minutes early. A couple moms have been eyeing him, but none looks hostile.

Still he almost runs into her arms crying, when he spots Abby.

She smiles at him, knowingly. “It’ll be alright, Nicky, dear. Most of these people you’ll never see again in your life.”

“God, I hope so,” he answers, probably not low enough. Ops. He puts on his best impression of a gossiping lady from a movies on the forties. “And where is David, that old bear, darling?”

Abby giggles and shakes her head. “Oh, he hates this kind of things. He always sends me instead.”

What the fuck? “Betrayer! So all that spiel from yesterday…?” Abby chuckles louder. “That motherf—”

“Parents,” a teacher calls them, involuntarily saving Nicky from his first slip of the day. “We’re ready to start, if you want to come in?”

She shouldn’t phrase it as a question. It gives Nicky the fake hope of having an actual choice.

Abby hangs onto his arm all the way to the door of the class, and he is half convinced she’s doing it to prevent him from running away. The gesture is understandable and welcomed, to be honest.

Inside, Nicky looks for the twins almost instinctively, and smiles.

Aaron is first row, sitting straight and looking at the door eagerly, almost bouncing on his seat. He smiles widely when their eyes meet and Nicky winks at him.

Andrew is in second row and probably not third only because that’d be too far away from his twin. They’re both beside the window, but he stares stubbornly out of it until Aaron turns and pokes his
arm to make him look. Nicky winks to him too, and Andrew’s chin falls from his palm, almost landing him on his desk. It’d be funny if it didn’t imply that both twins had been resolutely bracing themselves for Nicky’s absence.

Among the parents, Nicky looks like a child playing dress-up. He nervously tries to fix his shirt when the first person steps up to introduce himself and his job, all the while smiling radiantly at a girl in the last row. He works in an insurance company, which means Nicky dislikes him on principle.

A few others walk by, before they get to the M. Among them, a cop which Nicky instinctively recoils a bit from, a pharmacist with mouse-like eyes, the owner of a clothing shop who looks straight out of the eighties and a nurse who keeps glaring daggers at Abby, who in turn is apparently enough of a bigger person not to react.

Nicky’s turn is in the middle of it, roughly, which he tells himself it’s for the best, so he doesn’t have the time to sweat through both his shirts. The teacher is smiling, albeit maybe a bit uncertain, when she asks whether anyone is there for the Minyard twins.

“Yes, that would be me, Ma’am,” he calls out before he can stop himself, and he hopes he didn’t raise his arm enough to see under his armpit. That’d be embarrassing.

The lady looks half surprised and half relieved. Nicky never met her before, she wasn’t a teacher of the twins last year, so she probably only learnt about the story.

Or maybe nobody knows much at all, because as he walks to the front Nicky can hear clearly the not-so-low whisper of a child asking, “I thought they were orphans?”

Christ. Nicky tries not to give in on the impulse to turn and reply with a very mature mind your business.

Instead, he steals a look to the twins, who look like they’re not bothered at all, but rather too busy staring intently at their cousin, as if curious themselves about what he’s going to say. Nicky wants to tell them, come on, they’re there for most of the time, they know what he does.

He smiles politely to the class. “Hi!” Keep it friendly, Hemmick, you’re good at friendly, you’re the only friendly person in your family since you’ve been born. “My name is Nicky and I am Andrew and Aaron’s cousin. They’ve been living with me for a while, so here I am.”

A few of the parents shift, he can see a lady leaning to whisper to the ear of the one standing right next to her. He wonders what’s making them talk, his age or how little he and the kids resemble each others or something else. It’s more annoying than embarrassing, he has to say. He didn’t lean to whisper to Abby about a careless stain on a shirt or an awful fashion sense, when he was listening.

“Oh, I’m going to cheat a bit here, but I think I can be allowed. You see, I don’t only have one job, I have two.” He plays it up like something amazing, something great, and not the result of necessity. A few kids eat it up and stare, wide eyes and mouth opened. Nicky smiles. “I think it’s fair though since, you know, I have two kids.”

Someone laughs a bit. Nicky would bet it’s Abby who gives the start to it. Aaron is giggling too.

“I work as a bartender in a club at night, which means I prepare drinks that none of you is allowed to try until you’re twenty-one, sorry.” Another laughter from some of the men. A woman’s eyes go wide and her shoulders tense, but Nicky ignores it. “I also work at a coffee shop called The Wild
Fox, which is a very orange place with lots of funny people. I usually work on preparing the
different coffees or teas people ask for, but a few times, when boss is not around to stop me just
because I set the kitchen on fire once, I help out with sandwiches and cookies.”

He’s looking for it, but he’d notice even if he wasn’t. Aaron and Andrew perk up like one at the
last word, both eyeing the bag Nicky is now placing on the teacher’s desk.

“I’m going to cheat again, fellow parents,” he’s saying, winking in Abby’s direction as she shakes
her head with good humor. “So, I brought some of the cookies I made at the shop, today. Who
wants one?”

For a coward who never showed up to these events, Wymack’s strategy works impressively well,
because suddenly the room is filled to the brim with children’s excited yells. A couple parents look
devastated and another couple looks actually annoyed, but Abby was right and Nicky will
hopefully never have to see them again after today, so he just gives Aaron the bag with the cookies
with order to pick one — “Only one, Drew, don’t even try it,” — and then pass it around.

It takes a few minutes for the cheers to calm down and Nicky smiles when the attention back on
him is less expectant and more relaxed. He smiles again.

“I don’t have much to say about my jobs, except that they are remarkably similar in a couple of
things. Yes, they both are about preparing stuff to drink for people and both imply that I keep
running all over the place and organize myself well with all my colleagues, to make sure none of us
works too many hours or that we can have the time to be with our families when there’s something
important. We also need to communicate lots, because you can’t work in places like those if you’re
not willing to be a part of a group.” He lets his eyes fall on the twins. “Mostly, though, the places I
work at are places full of people who understand that sometimes I have troubles or I am tired or I
am sad, and who try to help me because they’re nice people who care. They are my friends, all of
them, and that helps me giving my best every day.”

He tilts his head to a side. “I know all of you have big dreams, and it’s great! I hope every one of
you accomplishes their own, seriously. But sometimes our dreams change, because we grow up and
change. It happens. And sometimes we can’t or don’t want to accomplish those big things
anymore. So I guess I’m here to say, it’s okay not to. It’s okay if your dream is to mix drinks in a
place that only opens at night and it’s okay if your dream is baking cookies. It’s okay if your dream
is just to make someone happy and you do a job you never thought you would because in that way
you can help them. It’s okay to have a dream and then do something else, too.

“It’s okay to be scared,” he finishes. “The world can be scary, every day. But it’s okay to take your
time to get over those fears, or even to work around them. We need all the jobs for the town to
work, you know.“

He hasn’t planned an ending, so he just awkwardly turns to meet the teacher’s eyes and she
hurriedly starts clapping, prompting the rest of the room to do the same. She thanks him and
hushes him back to the side with the adults. When he gets to Abby’s side, she loops an arm around
his elbow and pats his arm gently. He smiles at her.

Well, that wasn’t too bad, was it?

It’s over before Nicky really has time to realize. He hopes he didn’t doze off, to be honest, because
he completely stopped listening with the only exception of Abby’s presentation, which was obviously lovely and perfect and full of declarations of love and respect for all lives.

Which, Nicky thinks of Drake and mentally disagrees.

Anyway, he only realizes the whole thing has come to its end when the bell of the school rings, declaring the hour and the day over.

Wow, and Nicky thought two kids were chaotic. He almost loses sight of the twins in the blurry of screaming and running kids. He catches them again when he finds both twins facing off another kid, matching frowns on both their faces.

Seriously, can’t they go one day without antagonizing someone? Really? Nicky is trying his best, here.

He reaches them in a hurry, hoping to stand in between the confrontation before it gets physical, and he notices an apprehensive mom, the one who stilled as he spoke about working in a night club, doing the same. Okay, so maybe they can finish this quietly.

Except Nicky gets there in time to hear the other kid spit, “Well, your cousin is a fag!”

Nicky almost falters. What the fuck. He barely catches Andrew’s and Aaron’s arms before they throws themselves at the kid, but he’s quite out of it as he turns to him too.

His mother must have heard the comment too, because she’s flushed red with embarrassment and she spills apologies from her lips like drops from a sink. Always the same, and without any real intention behind them. Nicky’s heard them all already, one way or another.

Aaron has turned in his grip to hold onto his leg, but Andrew is still pulling at the restraint and Nicky is suddenly aware that for him it’s not just an insult to his cousin. He probably doesn’t really get the full meaning of the word, but he gets the gist of it and it’s enough to hit him too.

And Nicky, it has been appraised, does not react well to people hurting his cousins.

When he smiles to the mother, it’s the most angelic leave-a-good-tip smile he’s ever pulled in so many years of working in retail service. “Well, thank you for your apologies, Ma’am. I have to say, though the wording is not exactly appropriated, which I’m sure you’ll deal with it, — and oh my I wonder where you heard such a word? You must be repeating it from someone else — your son is not exactly wrong.” He knows they’ve ended up attracting glances, but whatever, he’s too deep into it to bother. “I do identify as a gay man, indeed.”

The woman blanches. Whether it’s because she’s realizing the enormity of his son’s actions in front of everyone or because her bigoted mentality cannot comprehend being in such close quarters with an homosexual, Nicky doesn’t know and doesn’t care. Instead, he bends down to pick up both twins, one per arm, and then looks down at where she’s crouching by her son.

“Have a nice day,” he tells her, like a slap. He knows people are watching and are seeing him walking out with his head held high.

He barely gives Abby an acknowledging nod, and she returns the gesture with seriousness on her face. They are out of the room before most people can unfreeze from their spot.

Halfway down the corridor everything crashes down on him, but one thing more than the others. “Okay, guys. I think it’s time we have a talk about me carrying you. You’re getting too big for my old back.”
Andrew looks at him unimpressed, but it’s Aaron who huffs, “Matt never complains about it.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not as big as Matt so maybe it’s time to think about walking on your own, uh? Or, hey, you can always cut on all the cookies you eat.”

“Or you could go to gym,” Andrew cuts in, merciless, and Nicky huffs a laughter.

They leave the school without looking back.

To say Aaron is enthusiast is an euphemism. He looks like Nicky gifted him a full ride scholarship for college, rather than cookies at grade school.

He helps setting and unsetting the table and he eats all his stuff without a complaint, so Nicky, as the reasonable guardian he is, tries to take his temperature to make sure he isn’t running a fever.

Aaron huffs a complaint as Andrew sniggers. “I’m not sick!”

“You’re doing chores,” Nicky rebukes. “You never do chores unless I tell you five times beforehand. What’s going on?”

The kid shoves the hand off his forehead. “I’m being polite.”

“You’re being suspicious. Did you get in troubles before I got to school? Is that it?”

Through more denials and more suspicions, they move to the beds to read a story and Aaron actually moves over to let Nicky rest in the middle, where both twins can comfortably see the pictures on the pages. Andrew curls up against his side and says nothing.

A few minutes later, when both kids’ eyelids are dropping with sleep, Nicky wriggles himself out, just to be slowed down by a low voice laced with tiredness.

“Aaron? What is it? Do you need anything?”

Aaron shuffles to get in a more comfortable position, closer to his brother though still not touching, and he mutters again. “Thank you for coming.”

Nicky tries not to let it swell his heart too much, but he can’t stop himself from smiling and bending to brush his nose tip against Aaron’s cheek. “You’re welcome, you little monster.”

Aaron giggles, even if he looks like he’s already asleep.

“You dirty liar!”

“Don’t shout in my coffee shop, brat!”

“You’ve never been to a parents event at school, Abby told me! You lied to me the whole time!”

Wymack scoffs at his words, and just picks up his mug to sip from it. “Did you or did you not
“That wasn’t a competition,” Nicky reminds him, rolling his eyes.

Matt arches a brow in his direction. “So you lost?”

“Of fucking course I won, who do you take me for?”

Nicky resolutely doesn’t ask about the money changing hands, from Matt’s and Dan’s to Renee’s. He thinks he’s better kept in the dark, this time.
Y’all asked for baby Neil so here you go. Remember you asked for it!

Alright, there's lots of hurt here but also another Birthday Party. Why do I always add Birthday Parties to all my angriest chapters? I have no idea.

The world is a fucked up place, Nicky knows. He just wonders why the world thinks it still needs to prove so to him, over and over again.

Nicky looks down at where his cousin’s hand is still securely wrapped around the other boy’s wrist and sighs. Honestly, his heart breaks again every time he has to lay eyes on the bruise on the freckled cheek and he struggles against the impulse to push the stray red locks framing his face under his wool cap.

“It’s not that ‘we can’t keep him’, Andrew,” he tries to reason. “It’s that people call this ‘kidnapping’ and it’s a crime.”

Andrew’s frown says he doesn’t much care what other people think about his actions toward his new friend.

“I can give him my bed,” he retorts, as if Nicky hasn’t even spoken.

“Okay,” Nicky sighs, bending on his knees to sit on his heels and be around face-level with the kids staring at him. He doesn’t miss how the other boy flinches at the movement, but Andrew’s hand keeps him planted on his spot. If it wasn’t for the hold, he’d probably already be on the other side of the park. “What about we try and understand what happened here before you start fishing for a roommate, uh? Also, Aaron should have a say in this, you know? Hypothetically.”

Andrew’s frown goes darker. “He’s one of mine.”

“People aren’t possessions, ’Drew. He’s not yours; at most he’s your friend.” Nicky huffs, shaking his head, then he turns to the boy. Blue eyes run to his like scared rabbits and he tries to smile reassuringly. “What’s your name, little dude?” Jesus, he’s turning into Matt.

The boy, who’s probably not much younger than Andrew but looks small and thin enough to pass for a toddler, shrugs as if the question didn’t hold much meaning to him. “Nathaniel.”

“Well, nice to meet you, Nathaniel,” Nicky cheers, and gets an unimpressed look from Andrew for his effort. “Do you have a surname too?” Nathaniel shuffles and doesn’t answer. Andrew tugs him closer to him and Nicky resists the urge to glare back at him. “It’s fine,” he says instead, still smiling. “Are you here all alone?”

A firm nod this time. Well, and isn’t that suspicious at all.

“What about your parents? Where is you mom? Or your dad?” Nathaniel’s whole body jerks at the
last word and his eyes go wide as if he only just considered the option of them, and he’s not liking it at all. Nicky eyes the bruise on his face again. “Did they give you that?”

He’s not expecting a direct answer, to be honest, and he doesn’t really need it. The way Nathaniel fiddles to pull his right sleeve further down only serves to divert Nicky’s attention to the purplish marks around his wrist too.

Well, shit.

“I’m going to get in so many troubles when this blows up in my face,” Nicky sighs in his hot Chai Latte, but neither kids deign him of an answer.

With only crumbles of cookie left in the dishes in front of them, Andrew and Nathaniel seem to have completely forgotten about the adult sitting on the other side of the booth and just stare at each others intently while keeping their UNO cards held close to their chests. Nicky sighs again.

He hasn’t gotten much out of either of them. For what he knows, this is the first time they met and Andrew found Nathaniel huddled in a bush, hiding through the leaves as if hoping for the world to spun around and forget about him. They had exchanged names and a few scalding comments about one’s bruises and the other’s clothes. Which, rude, Andrew was wearing the cat-eared cap Nicky bought him for his birthday. Then, for some reason, Andrew had decided Nathaniel was one of his and brought him to his cousin to rely the news.

Renee and Matt are on duty, Wymack out cutting deals and Abby accepted to pick Aaron up from Exy practice with Kevin when Nicky called her that he’d had an emergency while he was at the park. So now here he is, alone with a kid that he picked up at from the street and who for all he knows might have a family looking for him all over the place.

A shitty family, that much Nicky can tell.

What to do, now? Regardless of Andrew’s stubborn decisions, Nicky can’t exactly take in a kid as if he were a stray. The legal, financial and logistic issues are like an Everest mountain in front of him: impossible to overcome. Of course, the idea of sending him back to whoever tried to give him a shiner isn’t exactly appealing to him either.

“What am I going to do with you?” he huffs, resting his cheek heavily on his open palm. Then, louder, he adds, “Hey, Nath?”

Nathaniel looks up to him with wariness still written on his face, but at least he looks less nervous when Nicky uses a nickname than when he calls him by his full one. Andrew’s attention spikes too.

Nicky straightens himself and tries to convey all his seriousness to the kid without appearing menacing. “Is there anyone you could call to come and get you? Not your parents,” he hurries to add when Nathaniel’s face turns ashen at the mere thought. “Someone else. A relative that you trust? An older sibling or an aunt or a grandparent or—“

“Uncle.” It’s maybe the first time Nathaniel speaks loud enough for Nicky to hear without straining his ear. He takes it for a good sign.

“Sure, your uncle is fine.” He bends over to be closer and less threatening. “Do you trust that he
wouldn’t hurt you? Would you be safe with him?”

Nathaniel shrugs again, which is a big red flag in Nicky’s head, but then looks back to his cards. He holds them like a treasure. “Uncle Stuart gets mad when he sees me bruised.”

Which means it’s a recurring occurrence. Jesus. Nicky tries to breathe in deeply without it being so obvious that he’s trying to reign in the rage. Okay. “He should,” he says. “You shouldn’t be bruised.”

Nathaniel shuffles his cards around, doesn’t answer and plays a +4 that deepens Andrew’s frown. “Mom always says not to show him.”

Well, your mom’s an asshole, little dude.

“Do you have a way to call your uncle? A phone number? Or you can tell me his name and we can look if we can find him on internet.”

For some reason, Nathaniel wheezes out a chuckle at the last suggestion. Before Nicky can ask, though, he lays his cards on the table, face down. “Andrew says he’ll keep me safe,” he mutters.

This time, Nicky sends Andrew a dirty look. He doesn’t doubt that his cousin truly believes he can protect his friend, otherwise he wouldn’t have promised so, but the kids clearly have no conception of how these things work.

“Andrew told the truth,” he says though, following a thread of intuition when he watches his cousin elbow Nathaniel in the side for the lack of trust. “He did protect you. He brought you here, and he’ll help you get to your uncle. I think that counts as keeping safe.”

Nathaniel seems to think it through, rubbing at his side where Andrew hit, and in the end he huffs and shrugs. “I know his number by memory.”

Nicky smiles. Without hesitation, he pulls his phone out, unlocks it while making sure Andrew can’t see his password code and then offers it to the kid. “The sooner you call, the better. He’s going to be worried about you, when he’ll find out you’re missing.”

Nathaniel hums, his voice saying he doesn’t really believe it, but he punches the digits in and then brings the phone to his ear.

Andrew looks only mildly satisfied and stares at Nicky accusingly.

“Don’t give me that look,” the man retorts. “I already told you, we can’t keep him.”

“You’ll keep him.”

“Excuse me?!”

When Nathaniel had returned the phone saying his uncle wanted to talk to him, Nicky hadn’t been very surprised. If a twin were alone with a stranger, he would at the very least demand to speak with such person. Even being asked to move to a quieter place had been an acceptable request since he didn’t want to talk about the issue in front of the children either, even if the clearly British accent that met him was a bit surprising. He was mourning his phone bill when the other man had dropped the bomb.
“You heard me, Nicholas Esteban Hemmick.”

“How the fuck did you just—"

“I am currently in London. Making all the accommodations that will be needed to get Junior to come and live with me is going to take me around three days. In the meanwhile, I can’t expect him to be returned to my disgraced sister and her shrewd animal of a husband and at the same time to be kept safe until my arrival. Do you understand what I am saying?”

“I understand your sister and her husband gave your nephew at least three bruises bigger than his own face,” Nicky retorts before he can think of stopping himself. He can’t help it, not with this man talking to him like he’s too dumb to understand when Nathaniel said he’d seen the marks already and done nothing to stop the abuse. “What I’m saying is, I can’t keep Nathaniel. First of all, if his parents show up with the police, I’ll end up in jail. I have two kids of my own to care for!”

“I assure you,” Mr. Stuart replies in a cold voice. “There is absolutely no risk of a police involvement in this matter.”

Which is not reassuring, at all. “Be as it may, I have two kids. I can’t take a third one in!”

“You will be handsomely rewarded for the trouble.”

“Are you even listening to me?” Though Nicky would be lying if he were to say the prospect of money hadn’t hit the mark. He had no doubt that if this person had found out his name somehow, he could have easily found his financial situation too. And Nicky’s late on the rent, this month. “I can’t add a child to the mix, there’s already too much going on. And from what I’m gaining, it’d mean exposing my kids to some huge goddamn danger.”

The line stays quiet this time around, and Nicky sighs a white numb in the cold air of December, watching the cars running in front of the Wild Fox showcase. It’s almost Christmas. The twins haven’t written their letters to Santa yet, and they look quite annoyed every time Nicky brings it up. He wonders why he keeps doing so, when he knows he probably won’t be able to afford much of what they could ask.

“If the bastard gets his hands on Nathaniel, he will kill him.” Nicky jerks. The certainty in the voice is much scarier than its abruptness. “I understand this is not working on my favor, Mr. Hemmick, but your cousins have lived in a abusive home and now I ask you: could you, with a light heart, let them go back to their mother, if this was about them?”

“It’s not the same,” Nicky shakes his head even though he can’t be seen. Probably. Maybe? “My aunt was an addicted asshole. Your in-law seems something much more dangerous.”

“Not for a child,” Stuart retorts. “They’re both just as terrifying, in their kids’ eyes.”

Nicky exhales. He thinks of the day he picked the twins up, thinks of the yellowish mark around Aaron’s neck and the blood crusts forming in Andrew’s broken nails.

“I can’t risk them,” he whispers, his voice much lower now. “If it were just me, I would, I swear I would, but—”

“Three days,” Stuart insists, eager like a shark who just smelled blood. “Only for three days, and then I promise you Nathaniel’s father won’t be a risk for anyone anymore.”

For some reason, Nicky doesn’t think that’s something Stuart should have said on the phone. He
takes a deep breath, steadying himself, trying to remember why he has to say no.

Only as he exhales he realizes Stuart has hung up on him.

*Shit-fuck.*

Andrew looks up to him unblinkingly, but Nathaniel tenses when Nicky comes back and stands in front of them with arms crossed.

“You know,—” he mutters to his cousin, “—every now and then, it’d be nice to at least pretend I have some semblance of authority in this family.”

Andrew blinks. “You can choose tonight’s movie.”

“Jeez, thanks,” Nicky groans.

He falls back in his seat as Matt approaches them with a new to-go coffee in his hand and a worried expression.

Aaron looks utterly unimpressed with Nathaniel when they pick him up from practice. Which directly contrasts with how Nathaniel, instead, looks absolutely amazed by every minor thing, from the colors of the stands to the lights to the jerseys to the actions they watch the kids try before Dan barks at them to do their final warm-ups and get out of her sight.

“It was so cool,” he whispers when Nicky asks him what he thought, as they hang out in front of the locker room.

Nicky can feel, like a physical touch, the moment in which Kevin’s head snaps and his eyes zero on the new kid. “Exy is the *coolest,*” he counters, taking long strides to get close and take Nathaniel in from head to toe. “You’re little. Are you fast?”

Maybe it’s the tone of voice, maybe the frown or the way he holds himself so that the significant difference in height between them is more than visible, but Nathaniel clearly bristles at Kevin’s question. “Faster than you were to realize they stole the ball from you, for sure.”

*Great,* Nicky thinks. *He’s got a smart mouth.* He can’t foresee how this might end well, when Kevin has made of the no-nonsense attitude his own trademark.

Before they can get into a brawl, which Nicky really doesn’t want on his conscience, Andrew tugs Nathaniel by the shirt to pull him away from Kevin. The latter gets a look to his eyes, almost longing, as he stares to the twin and Nicky kinda feels bad about it.

“Can we *go*?” Aaron whines, stomping his foot on the ground. “I’ve still got homework to do!”

*That* is hard to call a whine.
Nathaniel looks progressively more nervous as they drive and by the time Nicky turns the key into the lock, he seems ready to bolt or faint or both. Andrew’s hand is still holding onto his shirt so he can’t do anything but follow inside, and Aaron won’t stop glaring at it.

“Oh, boys, I know we’ve got a guest for a few days, but this is still mid-week and you still got homework. Off you go.”

Aaron doesn’t need to be told twice and Andrew, though glowering and frowning, stomps heavily after him. Nathaniel, still in his grasp, follows with a taken aback expression.

Well, that’s roughly an half hour of peace to quietly freak the fuck out in full relax. Amazing.

So. Now what? Stuart promised three days which, yeah, is not long, but it’s more than Nicky can afford to get off from work, especially with rent and bills being due soon — too soon — and with Christmas around the corner. So, he’ll need to try and juggle everything together. He can do it. Not like he has a choice, but he can do it.

He throws together an instant mac-and-chees for dinner and mentally swears to go and buy groceries tomorrow morning. The twins will be at school, but he’ll have to take Nathaniel with him. Maybe Wymack will accept to keep him thirty minutes or so as Nicky runs to the store after his shift at the Wild Fox? He could take him along, but he’s not really comfortable walking around with someone else’s almost-kindapped kid at his hand.

Shit, he can’t leave him to Wymack, what if they find him there? He can’t put everybody in trouble like that.

Why did he let Stuart talk him into this, again?!

Right, he thinks, when he turns from the fires and almost jumps three feet in the air when he finds six eyes staring at him from the table. The twins have voracious looks, while Nathaniel looks quite uneasy. The bruise on his cheek is getting darker by the minute. Because I’m fucking weak.

“You could have helped me, you know,” he huffs, bringing the pan to slip the portions on the awaiting dishes.

“We finished all homework,” Aaron says, half preening and half defensive.

Nicky arches a brow. “All of it?”

Andrew chews on a mouthful of yellowish goods and lets his brother point excitedly at the third kid. “Nathaniel’s good at math.”

Nathaniel stiffens under the attention, but he can’t move his eyes from the food in front of him and Nicky is pretty sure he can hear his stomach grumbling from his own seat. “’t’s not true.”

“It’s great, Nath,” Nicky offers, trying to keep up the cheer in front of his brains calculations of how much this kid might weight compared to the twins. “Studying is tiring, though, so make sure you eat as much as you want, okay?”

The explicit permission breaks whatever reservation Nathaniel still had, because immediately after he plunges into his share like a full pack of wolves after a week of starvation. He gets cheese all over his face in his frenzy and Andrew scowls at him in disgust.
Honestly, it lights Nicky up a bit.

Andrew allows Neil in his bed as promised, then climbs into Aaron’s. Since the mattress are close enough to touch, it’s only the bedsheets that keep them divided, but it seems enough of a protection in his mind. Aaron looks honored for his brother’s trust so he dutifully sleeps on the far end of the mattress, almost on the edge, to let his brother have enough room not to be touched without permission.

Andrew, too, looks properly moved by the care and sleeps in between the other two boys with his face turned to his brother and Nathaniel’s back close to his.

Nicky tries not to let his heartbreak show when Nathaniel stares in open surprise, and a bit of wishfulness, as he kisses Aaron’s forehead and brushes Andrew’s hair from his forehead as a goodnight.

“Goodnight,” he adds then, offering just a wink because he’s seen how the kid reacted when Nicky got close to pick his dish. Which reminds him, he’ll need to throw the trash away as he goes out, to make sure the twins don’t cut themselves with the shard of the broken plate accidentally.

Nathaniel slips under the covers, a bit unsure, but mutters a wish in return.

Roland looks at him with eyes that Nicky doesn’t want to decipher as he watches him getting ready for the night.

Nicky wears mesh and leather, tonight, and thinks it’s for tips not to fall into the memories of things he’d done that first month on the street, seventeen and broke and homeless. His nipples and chest are fully visible and he needed talc powder to get into the pants. He breaks out the eye-liner Erik bought him as a present and doesn’t cry as he puts it on because that would mean wasting it and he’s not that rich of a bitch.

“Just be careful, Nicky,” Roland mutters, staring at him wearing his boots. “You look like you did the first month you got the twins. And we both know you were in a bad place, back then.”

Nicky doesn’t think he was that bad, then. He just went to bed crying every night he got to sleep, which meant every two or three days. Not a big deal.

It’s only three days, after all.

“I’m just stressed,” he promises. “This kid and all the expenses coming up are making me anxious.”

“You know, if money’s the issue, I can lend you what you need,” Roland offers, easily and with just a shrug of his shoulders. “Don’t tell them, but I love the twins too.”

“It’s nice of you, but I can’t. I already owe you all the late hours you’ve been working to babysit lately.” And Nicky needs to pay him for that, wishes he could pay more, because Roland is his saving grace in the whole mess which is his life. “It’s okay, I’ll work it out.” He forces a smile as
he walks past his friend and to the entrance door. “I’m a tough cookie.”

Roland snorts, and he holds the door open for Nicky. “Whatever you say, man. Just keep in mind I’m here to help, okay? I can’t go back to being Eden’s official klutz, after all.”

Nicky doesn’t deign to turn back, but he raises an arm and shows his middle finger in Roland’s general direction behind him.

The shift at Eden’s goes to shit.

The air is hot and stifling, the other bartender slipped and hurt his hip in the afternoon so he moves slowly and Nicky tries to compensate to avoid creating too much queue at the counter, and he spends his break on the phone with his boss trying to explain that some fucking idiot forgot to stock up on Aperol and they have barely enough to finish the night and, no, it wasn’t him, damn, he never calls the deliverers!

A bachelorette’s party arrives around midnight and they’re all already drunk enough that they start shouting orders one over the other and get impatient very fast. The usual patrons, most of which gay and the rest BDSM affectionate, swarm away from the group, which seems to annoy them further and when Nicky hands the wrong drink to the wrong girl, she throws it all back in his face. Don’t mind that alcohol fucking stings.

The security accompanies the girls outside as Nicky stumbles his way to the bathroom crying, and it’s only ninety percent the alcohol’s fault.

He’s really, really tired.

Andrew struggles and stomps on the floor when it’s time to go to school next morning. Nicky’s eyes are still red and he feels the weight of the world on his back.

“‘Drew, come on, you can’t skip class. Nathaniel will stay with me the whole day, I promise. He’ll be there when you get out, okay?”

It’s a long fight that starts at home, lasts through the whole ride and only ends with Nathaniel tugging at Andrew’s sleeve and promising help with his future math homework. The presence of the third boy is also the only reason Nicky doesn’t outwardly sigh in guilt-ridden relief as soon as the twins are safely secured inside the school grounds.

Nathaniel moves to the passenger seat, but he keeps to the far edge, almost smashed against the door under the pretense of looking out of the window when they both know he’s keeping close eye on Nicky’s every movement. He flinches slightly every time the man’s hand leaves the wheel to go to the stick.

Really, getting to the Wild Fox is a blessing.

Matt takes one look at him and puts down his bag, takes off his jacket and instead of leaving as he was clearly trying to, he immediately engages Nathaniel. Nicky feels so bad about keeping him
longer, but then his friend strikes gold, he mentions Exy, and the boy relaxes for maybe the first time of the day.

Renee looks at Nicky with worried eyes and he opens his mouth to say, *it’s nothing*, but ends up telling all the crap from the past thirty six hours and sitting on the floor behind the counter with her hand in his hair. “Oh, Nicky. I’m so sorry.”

“Yes, man,” Matt adds from where he’s sitting at the nearest table. Nathaniel, by his side, is engrossed watching video’s of Dan playing or coaching or doing something equally sporty and badass-y on Matt’s phone. “That sucks. Are you sure you don’t need a hand for the next few days? I don’t mind baby-sitting when Roland can’t. And Nath and I, here, are already best buddies, aren’t we?” Nathaniel dramatically *oh’s* over some action on the screen. “See? Best friends forever.”

“I can’t send Andrew and Aaron away right now, they’ll think Nathaniel made me snap and give up on them,” Nicky whines, though the objection feels weak to his ears knowing in three days everything should fix itself.

It’s more that, he doesn’t want Nathaniel to feel responsible if he has to leave the twins with someone else. He doesn’t want the social services to find out he cracked under pressure and had to take a fucking *break from his own children*. And most of all, he doesn’t want to leave the twins, ever, he wants them to know he’s always going to be there for them, even when he physically can’t.

Yes, he can see how much of this is just pride and self-doubt playing together to plot his demise. He can’t help his own thoughts, though.

“What about a single night, then?” Renee offers. “It’s Jean’s birthday tomorrow. We were thinking of throwing him a party here the next day, since it’s the weekend, but I could pick up the twins and Nathaniel too and organize a sleepover for tonight. Kevin and Katelyn can come too and the twins won’t notice you needed a moment to fix yourself again. After that, you can take the weekend off from the Wild Fox and work only at Eden’s. By Sunday, Nathaniel’s uncle should be here, right?”

“I can’t miss the hours,” Nicky sniffs, because that’s the first and easiest thing his brain can elaborate, but Renee knocks on his temple with two fingers, gently.

“You won’t,” she smiles. “I try to be good, but I’m not a saint. If I look after a bunch of kids on my Friday night off, I expect you to pick my shifts next weekend. How does it sound?”

Too good to be real, honestly. Nicky takes a wobbly breath as he tries to find a hole in the logic, a way to refuse, and to be honest enough with himself to see if accepting means taking the easy way out and not putting enough effort or if he’s being too stubborn in refusing this help.

A voice in his head leans heavily on the second option. It sounds very much like Wymack’s and it’s yelling.

“What do you say, Nath?” Matt cuts in and Nicky can’t understand if he’s being overstepped or mind-read. “Would you like to go to a sleepover?” When the kid’s eyes widen in alarm, he adds, “Jean, Kevin and Aaron all play Exy too!”

Nicky laughs wetly at the conflict on Nathaniel’s face. Soon enough though, the sport wins the kid over and makes him nod.

Okay, then.

He looks over to Renee’s soft eyes. “Thank you.”
“Don’t thank me,” she says, shaking her head. “I fear I’m close enough to give in to Andrew’s request of teaching him some fighting tricks.”

And maybe it’s the situation, the danger looming over them, or how sweet Renee is being or the memory, still brutally fresh, of Drake which makes Nicky sigh and shrug. “You know, I guess you can give him some advice, after all.” He doesn’t want to think that Andrew might need to use it for real in the future, but life seems hell-bent on teaching him that it’s better to be prepared.

Honestly, Renee has never looked like an high schooler. Sure, she’s been held back a year at a certain point for reasons she never talks about, but nineteen looks so much wiser on her, usually. Now, though, she beams and shines and looks so excited at the prospect of teaching Andrew martial arts and Nicky finds himself smiling too.

He dries his tears with his sleeve and exhales heavily, before forcing himself to stand back up on his feet.

Time to get to work.

Andrew is lukewarm to the sleepover idea and Nicky panics — because of course he is, Andrew can barely stand to sleep with his brother, how could he be so selfish and forget it, how could he just assume he’d be okay with sharing the room with so many other children, he’s such an awful person, he should be ashamed of himself — until the second he realizes all Andrew’s mistrust comes from the concentration of Exy players at the party.

“It’s dumb,” he says, and that earns him a glare from Aaron and a scandalized look from Nathaniel. “And Kevin’s annoying.”

“Well, Wymack’s kid really is good at making friends, uh? Like father…”

Renee opens the door in time to let Kevin and Katelyn run out, each aiming for a different twin. Jean follows at a slower pace, holding a horse plush thigh to the chest. Nicky knows from Dan that the thing with Drake had become known among the parents and it had sent Jean back several steps in his recovery from whatever happened to him in France. Apparently, the horse Jeremy gave him helps with the nightmares and the anxiety, so he’s started carrying it around more.

Nathaniel blinks a couple time, then beelines for him and starts to talk excitedly about his skills as a back-liner. Jean slowly loosens his grip on the toy as he tries to explain to the other kid how, no, no, that’s not how you do a block.

Nicky looks down to meet Andrew’s long suffering eyes. “Hey, don’t blame me, it’s not my fault you got yourself all jock friends.”
After dropping the kids, Nicky comes back home, gets into his comfiest pajamas, slips under the covers and takes a picture of himself. Matt replies two seconds later with a selfie of his own, lots of snoring emojis and the promise of an amazing fuck as soon as the three days are up.

Nicky giggles at Dan’s cross-eyed face in the background of Matt’s seductive expression, then he puts an alarm and goes to sleep.

He gets eight round hours of sleep, ain’t that shit mind-blowing?!

Now that he doesn’t have cheap fake Pradas under his eyes, Nicky can forgo some of his most daring outfits in order to get something softer that makes him look very Nice Guy Next Door. His top is baggy and slips off one of his shoulders, the pink material soft on his skin, and his black jeans go nicely with a pair of heels, tonight.

Those shoes, a funny birthday present from Matt that was not supposed to be really put to use, are another thing that Nicky hopes he won’t have to explain to the twins soon. It’s not like he can tell them, they make my ass look otherworldly and my thighs like altars for men to immolate themselves on.

His hair are left to fall lose, instead of tied in a bun, for once. He never realized how long they were getting until now, as they fall well past his jaw and on their way to the shoulders. Soon enough, he’ll have to get an haircut, but that’s a problem for Future Nicky; Present Nicky has too much work to do already.

By the time his break rolls around, he’s ranked up tips thanks to some kind of blind date event of a group of gay guys and Roland looks at him like a proud parent after he’s heard of his long afternoon nap. It’s hilarious enough that Nicky allows himself to sneak out the back door for a bit of fresh air and quiet.

It’s the end of November so he starts shivering almost immediately, but there’s a blissful silence in his head and only an occasion car roaring around him and it’s been a long time since he’s given himself time to just stop for a moment and let the world spin around without him. The twins are a firm thought in his brain, but secured in the knowledge that they are safe and relaxed and cared by someone who really cares for them. And if Andrew will come home able to kick Nicky’s legs out from under his ass, well, okay, that will be worth it.

He kinda wants a cigarette, not that smoking has ever been a vice of his. He’d taken a couple hits at fifteen, fooling around with fellow brats, and never understood the hype around something so smelly and uncomfortable. Kissing boys had been a much more pleasing way to disobey authority orders. But this seems like a night you’d spend sitting on a step, smoking and watching the shapes of grey against the black. The condensation of his breath almost gives the same impression, though, so Nicky ends up playing with that, blowing air into the night and watching it curl on itself like a puppy getting ready for sleep.

The cold is a strict ruler, though, and Nicky is Mexican enough to have a very low tolerance for it. When he pushes himself to his feet, his knee pops and he mentally groans.

He’s so busy contemplating his early old age he only realizes he’s not alone when a pair of black shoes enter his field of vision. “Excuse me, I need an information.”
Nicky looks up, meets a pair of dark eyes with long lashes and an heavy smokey-eye make up, and then darkness happens when his face explodes in pain.

He falls on the ground before he can even realize he’s been hit, struggles to his hands and knees only to be met with a ruthless kick to the stomach that sends him back on the ground. He’s kicked in the ribs another time, and in the gut, and in the side, before the woman kneels down in front of his face.

Breathing is hard, his chest hurts at every movement and he’s been left airless by the hits. His eyes fly around him, frantic, looking for an escape or at least an exit route, but finding that his attacker is not alone, at all, but flanked by other three men just as dressed in black as her and as menacing looking.

“I said, I need an information,” the woman repeats, as if she’d given Nicky any chance to answer the first time and beating him up was a sound tactic to catch his attention on such a mundane thing as asking for some kind of direction. “I’m looking for a little kid, you see. Red hair, blue eyes, is a little shit who needs to be taught a couple lessons in respect and obedience. What do you say, Mr Hemmick? Have you seen him anywhere?”

Nathaniel would be the first thought even without the description, because of course everything that can go bad does so. And when the recognition comes, so does the notion that these people do have the right person, the one they’re looking for, and this is not some kind of gruesome prank or misunderstanding or wrong person situation.

Nicky’s thoughts stop short and get stuck on a single loop of soundless recognition, full of certainty yet, somehow, void of fear.

He’s going to die. He’s going to die here.

The woman stares at him when Nicky focuses on her face again, and however long it’s been it’s clearly out of time, now. She grabs Nicky’s hair and pulls his head up from the ground, just enough to have some room to smash it on the concrete again. Light flashes behind Nicky’s closed lids and pain turns into liquid fire running against all the walls of his skull.

“I asked you a question, sir. Don’t you know it’s polite to answer?” Again, she hits Nicky’s head on the ground. This time a whine escapes his throat. “Come on, don’t make my friends ask again, they’re so much ruder than me.”

Someone grabs him by the back of his shirt and forces him up on his knees, then locks his arms behind his back. Now, fear starts to drip in, like in a sinking ship. Nicky is met with the apathetic eyes of a bulky man, and then with his knuckles. He tastes blood immediately on the first hit, but still takes three, all on the same side of his face, before the man takes a step back to let them woman again in Nicky’s sight.

“Come on, now, don’t be dumb. We’ve been playing now, but we don’t have much time before someone interrupts us, do we?” she says, calm and almost cheerful, as if this was just a bit of camaraderie between coworkers after hours. “You see, we didn’t mean to bother you here, but we’ve been to your place and there was nobody there. Where is the kid, Hemmick? We know you have him.”

In the shock of the world’s end, if nothing else, Nicky’s fear acts as his bigger ally and seals his throat, stitches it close with metal wire and a huge lump. The thought of Nathaniel being taken by these people is terrifying, but the knowledge of how many kids are with him at the moment, Renee, the twins, and how all of them would get caught in the crossfire, maybe killed with no other
reason that getting rid of a difficult witness, is worse.

Someone kicks him in the side where he is, and Nicky screams bloody murder when the tension of his position helps the strength of the hit. He is not even sure he heard the crack, but he felt it in the way his flesh caved in, no longer supported by the ribs that snapped. Something gurgles in his throat and he almost chokes on his blood, but the woman lets go of his hair and he curls forward just in time to spit redness on the ground.

The pain is excruciating and it brings tears to his eyes. Oh, God, he’s going to die.

“Last chance, Hemmick, and then I’ll have to send Junior a message with your corpse. Three.”

He’s scared. He’s so scared, he doesn’t want to die, he’s barely twenty-one. He’s scared, scared, scared—

“Two.”

He’s crying and sobbing and whining and trembling and he never hears One come.

The last thing he remembers is the floor hitting his cheek again.

He wakes up wondering if he’s awake for real. He thinks he’s been awake for a while, actually, because his thoughts are gaining logic, but are still too sluggish for him to be properly present to himself. He’s surrounded by whiteness and he can’t feel anything of his body, so maybe he died and this is all immaterial soul stuff.

Except that, slowly, things start crawling back into his awareness and the first thing is the feeling of dull ache whenever he breaths. And look at that, he’s breathing! That means he’s still alive, doesn’t it?

“Nicky?”

He blinks against the white like windscreen wipers with snow, but it takes too much effort to find his neck and turn his head in the direction of the voice. He moves his eyes, despite the headache starting to build in the middle of his forehead, and thankfully whoever spoke moves to enter his field of vision. Oh.

“Matt…” he says, just because he’s glad to see he recognizes the face, and not from the aggression.

Funny, isn’t he supposed not to remember that? People in movies never do. That would be such a bliss, rather than the clear picture of helplessness and terror and desperation he has in his brain right now.

Matt smiles weird. He looks like Nicky when he practices saying he’s okay in the mirror. Except Matt is not saying he’s okay, he’s touching Nicky’s… hand? He thinks it’s the hand, and in any case he can feel the warmth of touch and that’s nice enough for him. He’s kinda cold, now that he thinks about it.

“Blanket…” he mutters and he almost smiles as he watches Matt go in a frenzy to find him something, just to give up and strip of his own pastel blue sweater. “… naughty, Matt…”
Matt laughs awkwardly as he drapes the sweater over Nicky. It smells nice, like the cologne Dan lent him for the Bring A Parent To School friday.

And the thought of the twins eager faces that day soberes him up fast, kills half his buzz just like that. Suddenly, he’s staring seriously at Matt and his body is going still. “‘Drew… Aaron… where are—”

He coughs, anxiety messing up his breathing, and pain shoots up again in all his ribcage. Right. Ribs. Broken some. Oh, that doesn’t sound so good, uh?

“It’s alright, Nicky, they’re safe, I promise,” Matt hurries up to say, again and again as he holds Nicky’s shoulders and waits for his spasms to die down before accompanying back to lay on the… bed? Whose bed? “Andrew and Aaron are still at Renee’s.” Matt’s expression darkens. “Roland called her to ask if she could keep the kids because you’d been attacked. Nathaniel freaked out and started screaming that it was his fault and then it was chaos. She called us so Dan and Wymack went over to help her with the children and Abby and I ran here.”

Like on clue, Abby appears to Nicky too. He hasn’t heard any door or something and a look tells him she comes from the dead end side of the room. Unless she climbed in through the window, she’s been there the whole time and just went completely unnoticed. That’s sad and rude of Nicky. He’s sorry. He hopes Abby knows he’s sorry.

She smiles at him and caresses his face in a weird path. It takes Nicky a moment to understand she’s trying not to touch where his skin is broken or swollen or bruised by the hits he took. “You gave us quite the scare, Nicholas. As soon as you’re better you should call the twins; Andrew and Aaron are really worried for you.”

He will. God, he wishes he could call them now because he has the physical need to hear their voices and make sure they’re okay and alive and safe and so is he because, God, he could have died and they would have been alone and he would have never forgiven himself for that. But he can barely stick two thoughts together at the moment and speaking with the kids now would only upset them further. First, he needs to try and regain some coherence.

“What…” God, he could use some serious coffee right now. “What happened? I… I remember… the attack…”

Abby’s expression wavers, but her voice holds steady as she relies. “You were attacked outside Eden’s. You went out at the back during your break, but never came back. Roland thought it was weird you were taking so long, so he came to check and found you bleeding on the ground. The security chased the people who attacked you run away, but they only managed to get one man; the police has him now.”

“He’s been saying homophobic slurs all the time so the police is ruling it as a hate crime,” Matt adds, somber. “We didn’t know if telling them about Nathaniel was a good idea, so we kept it for ourselves. Your call whether to tell them or not.”

That sounds like a dumb idea. Telling the police. Especially if Nathaniel’s uncle really is coming for him. So Nicky nods and Matt does so and Abby too. That’s weird.

The door opens, Nicky notices it this time, and a nurse comes in looking tired and old. “I need to check the patient’s vials,” she says, and gets to work without waiting for an answer.

Nicky falls asleep as she’s asking him how he’s feeling now.
He wakes up another few times, and find out the last he remembers wasn’t the first. He’s got a concussion, apparently, a bad one, and he’s been doing in and out of consciousness for almost a full day now. By the time he’s coherent enough to ask Matt to help him sit up, Saturday is falling to darkness and Jean’s birthday is ruined.

When he says so, Abby brushes his hair out of his forehead. “No, Nicky, no. Jean was really happy to know his sister’s best friend was awake and feeling better.”

Nicky asks to call. Matt checks the hour and decides that, yeah, it’s technically a quarter to ten but it’s worth waking the children up to let them hear their cousin, so he pushes in the number and then gives Nicky his phone. Then takes it back when the grip starts trembling and going slack and holds it himself to Nicky’s ear.

It only rings once. “Matt?!”

“Hey, Renee…”

“Nicky! Oh, thankfully. Boys — give me a second, I left the room to answer in case it was bad news —, here, it’s Nick—“

“NICKY!” It’s hard to tell whether it’s Aaron, Andrew or both when Nicky’s ears rings with any loud sound, but maybe it’s the first, because this doesn’t sound like the second.

“Hey, bud,” he says, anyway, trying to keep his voice even and firm not to show that he feels anything but. He gives up on trying not to cry because he already is, so he decides to just try and be quiet about it. “Indoor voice, could you? My head is hurting, now.”

“Oh,” Aaron says, immediately falling into a murmur. “Did you hit it? Nathaniel said his father had come for you!”

Oh, okay. So that’s out of the bag, uh? “I don’t know, buddy. It was some mean people. The police says they probably were just drunk and — it’s complicated, bud, and I don’t have much time.”

“What— why?! It’s been an whole day! Where are you?! When are you coming to pick us up?! It’s already bedtime!”

“I know, bud, I know. I’m— You see, I hurt my chest really bad and I am at the hospital right now, did they tell you that?”

“Yeah. Wymack said Abby was coming to heal you.”

“Yes, Abby’s here and she’s doing a great work. But, you see, I hurt my chest really bad and I need to stay very still in the bed for a bit longer.”

“Oh. So you’re…not coming?”

It’s impossible to mistake the hurt in the twin’s voice, or not to hear the unspoken ever hidden at the end of the sentence. Nicky couldn’t bear it. “Of course I’m coming, bud, you know I am. Just, not tonight. I need you to be nice for Renee and her mom for a bit longer, okay? Tomorrow we’ll find another solution, but I need to stay at the hospital one night longer.”
“We could come there! We could keep you company!”

“That’s really sweet of you, bud, but kids can’t stay here the night, only one person is allowed. It’s okay, Matt will be here—“ he says, stealing a glance to the other guy who nods and touches his thigh with the hand that’s not holding the phone, “—and look out for me, okay?”

“But what are you going to do?!”

“Sleep, mostly. You know, like when you have the flu and you need to sleep lots for it to pass. Same thing. It’s going to be very boring for poor Matt, yes. It’s better if you stay at Renee’s, you see? Can you do it for me, just for a day?”

Aaron’s answer is a long silence. Before Nicky can ask, there’s a shuffling sound. ‘Nicky?’

It takes his brain a moment to register. “Oh, hey, ‘Drew. How did it go? Did you have fun with the jocks?”

“Where are you?”

Nicky has no doubt that if he gave the kid the address, Andrew would somehow backpack his way to his room by tomorrow morning. “‘Drew, I’m at the hospital, you can’t come see me yet.”

“No.”

“Yes. Just until tomorrow, okay? It’s only a night. You need to keep an eye on your brother and Nathaniel while I’m here, remember?”

Andrew’s silence is all but convinced. Nicky can tell. After long minutes, though, it ends with a sigh, which is enough of a good answer. “Okay.”

“Thank you, ‘Drew. And guess what? I’ll buy you Sunday Special Sundae at Sweetie’s, as soon as I’m out of here. How does that sound?”

“… Don’t care.” It’s a valiant effort at keeping his cousin’s health his main focus, Nicky can appreciate it, but there’s a tiny sparkle of interest that Andrew hasn’t been able to snuff out yet.

Nicky smiles, even though his mouth hurts like fire when he does. “Well, I’m going to buy it for you anyway. As an apology for leaving you with the Exy fans longer than planned.”

“They made a court in the living room. They made me play. With a broom.”

Do not think about how cute that is, don’t think about it, you can just grill Abby for pictures later. “Sounds horrible, I’m sorry you had to endure that. Was the cake good at least?” He and Wymack slaved away to have the cake ready for the evening, on Friday, and because basically every kid at that party liked something different and was either allergic or just in a feud with something that someone else loved. It ended up with an hazelnuts and chocolate cake and he’s been praying that it worked ever since.

Andrew made a so-and-so sound. “Renee let me add sprinkles on top,” he says, then Nicky hears some rustling before the twin adds, in a lower and more conspiratorial voice, “They were rainbow.”

Nicky giggles stupidly. Andrew is not a fan of colors as a general rule, but he’d found Nicky’s one and only rainbow shirt and Erik had showed him his own rainbow phone-case and explained to him about the gay flag. Ever since, he’d been quietly pointing out everything rainbow he could see, making it a secret game of his and Nicky’s.
“They were what now? ‘Drew, that’s so cool! I’m going to ask Matt if I can have rainbow sparkles on my jello too.’” Matt arches a brow at the sentence, but smiles a bit before shaking his head. “Oh, he’s saying I can’t. Well, now, that’s mean.”

Someone knocks on the door and then walks in without waiting for an answer. Nicky doesn’t remember the black man, but the white coat he’s wearing is familiar enough to draw the conclusion. “Drew, I need to go, the doctor is here to visit me. I’ll call tomorrow, okay? Keep an eye on the other two for me.”

This time, Andrew’s noise is affirmative. “Renee taught me how to fight,” he says and then doesn’t elaborate. Nicky doubts she’s managed to teach him all about how to fight in a couple days, but he’s still a bit anxious of the result.

Before he can ask, though, Andrew has already relinquished the phone to someone else. Renee’s voice is quiet, probably to avoid being heard by the kids, but it rings clear with honesty, “I will keep them safe, Nicky.”

He doesn’t doubt it, but Matt pulls the phone away before he can reply. He brings it to his own ear and then hastily leaves the room to continue talking, maybe with Renee or maybe with Dan. Abby takes his seat instead, and holds Nicky’s hand just as, if not more, gently.

The doctor is smiling at him. “I’m sorry for cutting your call short, but I’ve been told you’re coherent now and I wanted to have a talk before you went to sleep, if that’s okay?” Nicky nods, throat dry. “Very well. I am doctor Samwell and you’re in my tender care at the moment. How do you feel now?”

It’s a routine check up. Nicky relies his pain and thinks he’s done until doctor Samwell mentions this or that area of his body and he realizes that, oh, yeah, that one’s hurting too, would you look at that?

“It’s quite normal,” the man reassures him. “You are still stuffed with painkillers, after all. At the moment though, what requires the most attention are your broken ribs. They will take time and we can’t put a cast or anything on you, so we can only wait until they heal on their own. We’ll keep a close eye on the lung, to make sure we treated the puncture wound right and that there are no complications, so you’ll have to stop by the hospital quite often for the check-ups. Here’s the schedule,” he hands Abby a paper and Nicky doesn’t get to see how many visits will this be, but he can already guess it’s more than he can afford, honestly. “That said, we will discharge you tomorrow, but heavy duties, all kind of physical strain and every work that cannot be done laying in bed is going to be off-limits for the next two weeks at least. You can reintroduce those slowly in your routine after that, but it will be around four weeks before you’re completely healed.”

“Four weeks?!” It comes out of his mouth before he can stop it. That’s basically until Christmas! He can’t take a full month off! Wymack has a paid leave policy for injuries and illness, but Eden’s doesn’t and, oh God, Nicky doesn’t have a health insurance, not for himself. He went and got it changed from an insurance on himself to one on the twins, because he couldn’t afford all three back then. Shit. Shit, shit, shit, how much is this going to be? He doesn’t have this money, for fuck’s sake.

Doctor Samwell stares at him sternly. “At the very least. If you push yourself sooner than, good chances are you’ll hurt yourself again and it will be even longer before a full recovery. Not to mention the chances of developing some kind of chronic issue. Would you rather that?”

No, Nicky doesn’t. But he’s got the twins to think of and… Jesus, how is he going to do this?
Abby probably knows him too well, because she turns to the doctor before he can leave. “Sam, how much is this going to cost?” she asks, direct, and Nicky almost whines because, unless she wants to give him an heart attack, he doesn’t want to know right now.

Doctor Samwell blinks, confused, at her. “Uh, the surgery, the stay, and the future visits have already been paid for, so he only has to make sure he gets his painkillers and antibiotics. I can check how much those costs, if that’s what you mean?”

Wait, what. “Paid? By whom?”

Samwell turns a couple pages, frowning as he does so, before stopping abruptly. “A certain Stuart Hemmick made a bank transfer earlier this morning. We thought he was a relative?”

Stuart. And holy fucking shit, unless the world was really out to fuck Nicky over again and again, he used a fake name too. Shit. What the fuck has he gotten himself involved into? Actually, what did Andrew get him involved with?!

He thinks back to a little hand firmly wrapped around Nathaniel’s and he sighs heavily. Andrew’s gay crushes will be the death of Nicky, really.

Abby takes care of the formalities with the doctor and Nicky throws in a late thank you when the man is already on the door before sinking deeper into his sturdy mattress and even sturdiest pillow. That’s depressing.

“Do I want to know what’s going on, Nicholas?” Uh oh, she broke out the full name, she must be getting serious.

Nicky sighs under he searching eyes. “Trust me,—” he says, honest to the bone, “—I kinda wish I knew too.”

Matt comes back and shows Nicky the video of Andrew, Aaron and Jean defending the back of a couch as if it was a goal. Kevin snatched Nathaniel and Jeremy for the strikers team and there’s Wymack yelling loud encouragements to every child in the background. Renee is in the frame, smiling as she moves on the sidelines to play referee and, wow, Andrew really is good, even with how long it’s been since he last went to practice. Aaron and Jean are just as good, but somehow, still, Nathaniel manages to slip through them and score every now and then.

“Damn, he makes the others look like they’re going in slow motion,” Nicky can’t help but notice. The kid is fucking fast, okay?

Abby laughs. “Kevin has been trying to recruit him for the team ever since. And to get Andrew back, which ended up with orange juice all over his slice of cake.”

Nicky grimaces. “Sorry about that,” he tries, mentally preparing another speech to give his kid, but Abby shrugs.

“To be fair, it was bound to happen,” she sighs. “Kevin needs to learn that he can’t always have what he wants, not even when it comes to Exy.”

Matt snorts, from his spot lying side by side with Nicky and playing with his hair. “Good luck with that.”
After lunch hour on Sunday, Matt helps Nicky back to his feet as Abby pulls a change of clothes from her—huge—handbag. “They are David’s,” she says, sounding apologetic and a bit amused. “I though flannel shirts would be better, they’re soft and you don’t have to raise your arms to slip them on.”

Nicky lets himself be dressed in what could easily be the official outfit of the woodcutter from Red Riding Hood and then lets Matt wrap him in a side hug and bear some of his weight. Walking is annoying and hurts his ribs, so he actually exhales a sigh of relief when he manages to carefully sit in the back of Abby’s car.

Because that’s a thing now, Abby taking him to her place because he’s apparently unable to stop when needed and unreliable to ask for help.

It’s not his fault he had to do on his own for years, okay? It’s taking time to untangle all that bundle of abandonment issues.

The drive is simultaneously too long and too short. Nicky’s concussed head is not ready to deal with the loud excitement and worry of little children, but the moment they park and the door slams open all the thoughts short-circuits and reboots on the core thought of Nicky’s existence: the twins.

Aaron lets go of Renee’s hand immediately to run down the steps of the entrance and to the car, and Nicky has barely gotten to his feet by the time the child barrels in his legs, arms spread to try and hug him fully.

It hurts like a bitch, but Nicky falls to his knees under the memory of the attack, of the panic, of the dreadful certainty that he was going to never see his cousins again. He’s not sure whether Aaron and Andrew realize that, but they probably do because they already lost their mother and they know death intimately by now.

So what if Aaron pulling back just to crash again in Nicky’s chest, just to wrap his arms around the broader shoulders and press his cheek against his cousin’s swollen one, almost rips a scream of pain from Nicky’s throat? Aaron is a warm weight pressing against him and they’re both safe and breathing and here. It’s fine.

Nicky opens his eyes above Aaron’s shoulder to see that Andrew is approaching at a much slower pace, looking wary as if not sure he can trust this to be reality. Renee, behind him, has Nathaniel securely in her arms as they both look at the reunion happening. Poor kid looks guilty as Hell, Nicky will have to talk to him.

Andrew stops close enough that he’s pressed against his brother’s side and the only difference between them is how his arms remain firmly by his side even as he takes in Nicky’s every other detail. When he lifts a hand, it’s to touch the scabbing on Nicky’s other cheek, ever so gently, an immaterial caress almost.

Nicky smiles, because Andrew has this capability of gentleness to him, because he hides so much but falls back into it when he’s in the little circle of people he loves, so fiercely for such a little kid. When he looks at him for real, not at his injuries, Nicky smiles and moves a hand from Aaron’s back to offer his fingers. “Hey, there.”

Andrew snaps like a snake, grabs onto Nicky’s middle finger apparently with all intentions to
choke the life out of it, punishing for the scare he just went through. Nicky lets him and just bends forward to lay a soft kiss to his forehead which, in turn, Andrew allows him.

Aaron demands the same treatment immediately after, and in the next six seconds Nicky is pulled inside the house and forced to sit on the couch. Stephanie, Renee’s adoptive mother, went to work but said she’d be praying for him, apparently. Renee accompanies her well wishes with a cup of hot herbal tea of some kind which is very appreciated at the moment.

Soon enough, the talk falls to Matt, Dan, Renee and Abby, and Nicky is pushed on the role of couch pillow as the adults organize the future weeks to make sure the twins get to school, Nicky goes to his appointments and nobody skips on anything. It’s not too bad and Nicky doesn’t mind resting with Aaron curled against his left side and Andrew against his right. If he dozes off, nobody points it out.

Renee offers him a piece of cake before they leave and Nicky doesn’t have the heart to say no when Andrew whispers in her ear about adding rainbow sprinkles.

They don’t go to the flat. Matt does and darkly relies that, indeed, someone broke in and trashed the place completely. One of Nicky’s shirts has been laid on the bed and stained with something red that looks too much like blood to be some synthetic Halloween trick. The twins aren’t told about this.

Nathaniel trembles the whole time. At Renee’s place he wouldn’t come close to Nicky, in the car he started sobbing silently and Matt had to put him on his lap to get him to calm down. In Abby’s house, he jerks at the mere sight of Wymack as if waiting for the man to strike at him any moment. It’s been long enough that Nicky completely forgot about how scary his boss can be at first sight.

It’s also hard not to see how hurt Wymack looks, but to his credit he gives Nathaniel all the space, keeps his distance and passes things to him through Kevin with nonchalant moves.

After being forced to take dinner and more pills, Nicky manages to get the boy alone as he gets into the bathroom and finds him huddled in the shower, head bent into his knees and lip bitten through his teeth.

Nicky tries to kneel down and mentally apologizes to Matt because he’ll need help to be pulled to his feet later. Nathaniel realizes by his pained sounds that he’s not alone and his head snaps up to meet Nicky’s eyes. “There are comfiest places, if you need to have a cry,” he offers.

Nathaniel hastily cleans his face as if just realizing it shouldn’t be covered in tears. “I’m sorry, I—“

He’s close to hyperventilation, so Nicky hushes him calmly. “It’s okay, Nath.” He knows he won’t be believed if he says he’s okay, or that Nathaniel’s parents aren’t involved in this. Instead, he says, “It wasn’t you who hurt me, Nath. It wasn’t your fault at all.”

“But—“

“Nu-uh! Sick people privileges: what I say, is law. And I say, not Nathaniel’s fault.” Nicky pretends to hit a judicial hammer in thin air, and Nathaniel frowns, clearly displeased with a logic he can’t follow. “Don’t worry about me, little dude. I’m big and I can take care of myself. I’d much rather you didn’t get hurt, anyway.”
Nathaniel starts shaking his head, stubborn, but says nothing. They stay where they are, sitting on the floor in the bathroom, for long minutes. The kid tries to raise an objection every now and then but Nicky shuts them down with different sound effects every time, which seems to be received with growing annoyance. His ribs are hurting some, but he elects to ignore it.

It’s almost a quarter of an hour later that someone knocks heavily on the door. “Oi, brat, did you drown in there?”

Nicky laughs, pretending not to see how Nathaniel goes rigid at Wymack’s voice. “We’re doing just fine, thank you, boss!”

“… Is Nath in there? Because Abby’s been looking for him and Andrew looks ready to tear a hole in my couch.” Oh, right.

Nicky looks at Nathaniel, who in turn looks at him with worry in his eyes. “Wymack is a good bear, I promise.”

Still not looking much sure, Nathaniel finally stands up and out of the shower, and Nicky points the door to him with an embarrassed face. “I might actually need you to call someone to help me because I’m not sure I can stand up."

Wymack grumbles the whole time as he pulls Nicky up and all but carries him to the bed in the guest room, but Nathaniel and the twins follow close and seem much more relaxed now that the injured one is back under their supervision.

Honestly, the lack of faith of all these people, it’s kind of insulting.

After the twins climbed on the bed on both his sides — and Nathaniel climbed behind Andrew — and forced him to read bedtime story after bedtime story, it was kind of unavoidable that he’d fall asleep, but maybe that had been their goal all along. Still, he wakes up from his nap surrounded by kids when the door of the room is slammed open.

He jerks, and then whines when his injuries rebels violently against the motion, and Aaron screams. Matt is coming fast behind the man, but before he can grab him, Nathaniel yells.

“Uncle Stuart!” Nicky sees him jump off the bed, sees Andrew’s hand falling short of grabbing him, and then the child is running to the man. To his credit, the stranger doesn’t hesitate in going down on one knee to grab him. “You came!”

Uncle Stuart wears a grey suit as if he’d just come out of a business meeting and a dark purple necktie. He has a refined elegance to himself, even if he shares very little with his nephew, not even hair or eye color from what Nicky can tell. When he speaks, it’s with the same British accent he had on the phone. “Of course, I did,” he replies, raising with the kid firmly in his arms. He detaches just enough to take a good look to Nathaniel’s injured face, but keeps a hand firmly on his nape. “I’m sorry it took me so long.”

“I’m sorry,” Nathaniel crumbles, dam open once again as he holds onto his uncle’s clothes and starts to cry. “Mom said to never tell you, but Nicky said it was okay to and I didn’t know what to do but he said to call someone who wouldn’t hurt me and I couldn’t think of anyone else."

Nicky can see the moment when Stuart, much like himself, gets devastated by the words of his
nephew. Nobody else. He had to pick an uncle from the other side of the world because he couldn’t think of anyone else who wouldn’t hurt him. Jesus Christ.

“I am sorry too, my boy,” Stuart replies, shaking his head a bit and, apparently unconsciously, shifting his weight to gently rock his nephew. “I should have realized your mom was a part of the problem. I trusted her too much and I apologize.” He takes a deep breath, as if to steady himself, but speaks firmly. “I promise you, boy, it will never happen again.”

Nathaniel sobs slow down during the speech and stop out of sheer surprise at the last sentence. Stuart sighs to his uncertainty. “You will not go back to your parents’ house, Jun—” Nathaniel whimpers at the name and Stuart hesitates. “Abram?” He says it like a question, and Nathaniel nods to it. “Abram. I made sure of it. You will come to live with me. If you agree to?”

This is not a question Nathaniel should have to think about, yet the kid hesitates. “What about father?”

Stuart’s expression closes off. “Your father cannot hurt you anymore, Abram.”

Nicky shivers at the wording. With all that went down lately, he fears what it might mean.

Nathaniel doesn’t seem to share his concerns and stares at his uncle as if appeasing the notion before nodding. “And… mom?” He doesn’t look as scared, speaking of her, but he’s clearly not at ease either.

Even Stuart looks conflicted at the mention of the woman, but ends up shaking his head. “Your mother betrayed both our trust. I’ll help her find somewhere else to live, but I will not give her another chance with you. If you don’t want to stay with me, I can find another solution for you, Abram, but not her.”

It takes a bit longer, this time, for Nathaniel to elaborate the thought. In the meanwhile, he plays with the dangling chain of a golden pocket watch in the breast on his uncle’s suit. In the end, though, he nods a bit bashfully. “Can I stay with you, then?”

There’s pure relief on Stuart face when he promises that, yes, of course he can stay, it will be okay and London is beautiful, he’ll love it there. Nicky would have felt the hit of the last one even if Andrew hadn’t been close enough to brush against his side when he jerked, taken aback. Oh, boy.

Discreetly, as Nathaniel and his uncle hug, he offers his finger to his cousin and Andrew clings to it immediately. He’d known this would have probably been how it ended, but still.

After a few seconds, Stuart seems to remember about his audience, though he still ignores Matt and Wymack on the door as he turns to Nicky. His displeased frown seems sincere enough. “I think I owe you an apology too. I was sure my in-law wouldn’t be fast enough to track you down before I took care of him, but I underestimated his reach and you were hurt. The fault falls entirely on me.”

“Leave some for the people who carried out the attack, would you,” Nicky mutters, somehow annoyed. When Stuart smirks, he can see some faint resemblance with Nathaniel as he played Exy. “When will you two leave?”

“Tonight,” Stuart nods. “It will take time to take out the rest of the trash, and Nathaniel will be safer far away from here as it happens.”

“Okay,” what else can he say? He has five broken ribs. He would fucking say that Nathaniel is better off in another fucking continent.
Nathaniel is staring at Andrew. It’s a very intense staring. Nicky is half sure they are communicating with micro movements of their eyes. It’s the only option.

When Nathaniel looks to Nicky, he offers an earnest little smile. “Thank you,” and that’s it. Nicky can tell there’s lots to unpack in those two words, though, he he takes them as they are.

“You’re welcome, little dude.”

“We should get going right now, actually,” Stuart interjects somberly. “Nathaniel’s place is in Baltimore so we’ll have to call my people there to tell them what he wants to take from his room.”

“Wait, Baltimore?!” Nicky stares at Nathaniel. “How did you get all the way here?!”

Nathaniel shrugs. “Father had business to do here.”

The sheer amount of circumstances that played together to get Nathaniel and Andrew to meet and then Stuart to come here and then the kids to not being home when people broke in blows Nicky’s mind away. Wow. So much could have gone wrong, it’s impressive it didn’t. For once.

Nathaniel wriggles in Stuart’s grip to be let down and when his feet touch the floor he’s already running to the bed side. There, he stands and stares at Andrew some more. Nicky’s almost tempted to remind those two that words exist when his cousin shrugs. “I hate you, anyway,” he says.

Which, objectively, is awful and Nicky is ready to scold him when Nathaniel opens up in a huge smile. “No, you don’t,” he laughs, before turning and running back to his uncle. He waves to Nicky and Aaron as he goes. It’s weird.

Stuart picks him up as soon as he’s back in reach. Matt comes closer to hush a low goodbye to the kid, and the man stares at Nicky in the meanwhile. “I have not forgotten about the reward,” he says.

It physically hurts Nicky to reply, “Keep it.” By the expression of disbelief on Stuart’s face, he must be apart of Nicky’s financial situation. “If I suddenly come up with a big sum of money, social services will want to know how I got it. I can’t risk it.”

Absurd, how much of his life revolves around making sure nobody takes his cousins from him, when after their mother died nobody else seemed willing to take them. Nicky will forever be bitter about it.

Stuart looks at him with a frown. “If that is what you wish,” he says, but there’s a calculating look in his eyes that Nicky doesn’t really like.

In the end, Matt and Abby say their goodbyes, Katelyn waves sweetly and Kevin looks ready to cry for the player he hasn’t even managed to acquire yet already lost. He tells Nathaniel to keep training in the UK and Nathaniel tells him he’ll be a pro and kick his ass, one day. Kevin looks satisfied with it.

The twins don’t accompany Nathaniel and his uncle to the door. They stay firm to Nicky’s sides, and he looks at them alternatively for a while before sighing heavily and letting the mattress and pillows try to devour him whole.

“What a shitty day,” he lets himself say.

“You said shitty,” Aaron informs him.
“Shitty,” repeats Andrew.

“I can’t ever catch a break with you two, can I?”

It’s a bad night for everyone. Nicky keeps waking up with nightmares and pain, the twins refuse to sleep with Kevin and Katelyn to stay in the room with him and wake up every time he does too, and some more just to check he’s still alive.

When they wake up, Nicky keeps them close as Kevin and Katelyn go to school instead and they spend the day playing card games on the bed. Andrew is a monster at this, his memory amazing as always, and Aaron is a good enough strategist. At the moment, Nicky doesn’t even have good reflexes so he retorts to regularly cheating, much to the twins annoyance. By afternoon, the twins are probably already plotting his murder, but that means they raise no complaint and dutifully go to school the next day, so who’s the real winner?

“They could kill you in your sleep, as you are now,” Wymack reminds him. Whatever.

After the first week, Nicky is ready for work again, except work is apparently not ready for Nicky because Roland and Matt kick him out of both establishments. With nothing else to do, he finds himself at the kitchen table of Abby’s house ready to start counting how to find the money now that the month end is coming closer.

His bank account opens and, sure enough, the amount of savings is still the same as before the attack, inflated only of an early pay from Wymack for next month, which makes Nicky’s throat close a bit. That damn teddy bear.

When he goes to, reluctantly, pay his rent and the due bills, though, he finds them weirdly taken care of. A rapid check confirms that his rent has been paid all the way to next December, a full year. It doesn’t take a genius to know who did this, and Nicky is only a bit pissed because, of course, he can’t return money that has already been spent, apparently.

A doubt comes to him, and he hurriedly calls his landlord to check. Indeed, the man offers his sadness for the robbery Nicky suffered and assures him that he went and foresaw the works in the flat and everything is in order and ready for him and the kids to move back in. Oh well.

Nicky hangs up and stares at his bank account with wholly different eyes. With all those expenses out of the way, the money in there suddenly seems much more and he can’t find it in himself to be mad at Stuart.

Looks like the twins will get a nice Christmas, this year.

“I’m just saying, you could stay a bit longer.”

Nicky laughs at Abby’s pout. “What’s with you and trying to adopt me? You have two kids already, you don’t need five.”

“Excuse you, I have three,” she retorts, sending a look to where Wymack is holding Kevin’s
racquet high above his head so the kid would stop practicing and say bye to their leaving guests instead. Nicky laughs of that too.

It’s been two weeks. His ribs still hurt and he’s still off work until the end of the month, but Christmas is in eleven days and he’s refusing to let worry take him. Instead, he’s planning all the trips he still has to do to gather everything and he smiles. “Tough luck, sister.”

She slaps him on the arm, carefully.

Andrew is frowning, but for no other reason than it was a while since he last did so, and Aaron is chatting excitedly with Katelyn about something for tomorrow at school. Nerds.

It’s a bit of a fight to make Abby let them go, but in the end Nicky gets into Matt’s car and they drive back to his place. He knows Stuart took care of the mess of the apartment, but it’s still a relief to find an whole door when they get there.

Matt is still stiff by his side. “Want me to go in first?”

Nicky is ninety percent sure Matt kept from him some details about the devastation, when he saw it. He can’t say he’s dying to know whatever the other decided was too bad to share. Still, he shakes his head and goes in first.

Okay, the house was never this clean. Not even when Nicky didn’t have the twins, not even when he first moved in. What the heck. Maybe whoever takes care of the bodies took care of the place?

_That’s a creepy thought, Nicholas. Stop._

Andrew and Aaron explore the place with critic eye. They don’t seem happy to see that a few marks on the walls from their early days of Exy are gone — which Nicky is instead really happy about —. Matt wolf whistles at the spotless kitchen and then shrugs under Nicky’s glare. “You can’t tell me you’re not impressed.”

He is. He’s also freaked out a good deal, thank you very much.

“They washed the _Worry Eaters!_” Aaron screeches from his room. “They got the mayo stain out!”

“How?! I washed it three times and it never budged!”

“I don’t know! It’s _awesome_!”

“Guess the twins are impressed too,” Matt snorts, shaking his head in good humor. He looks at Nicky. “You sure you don’t want me to stay? I can help.”

Nicky sighs dramatically. “Matthew, my love,——” He gets close enough to put a hand on the other man’s cheek, “—if I see any of you people again before the next ten hours pass, I will cry. Let me go. I want to be free.”

He’s done being coddled, seriously. He thought he was going out of his mind these past weeks, and Matt knows because he’d been on the venting side of such complaints more often than not. Therefore, he makes the right call and just hastily lays a little kiss on Nicky’s healed mouth before leaving with a cheerful shout to the twins, who don’t really bother answering. Oh well.

The house is really perfect. If things have been broken, they have been substituted and Nicky is none the wiser on which they are. He finds the twins sitting close on their beds, almost on the line between the mattress, holding their pluses close to the chests. Aaron’s head has lollled to the side.
and rests on his brother’s shoulder and Andrew seems to be allowing the comforting gesture.

Nicky tilts his head to a side as he watches them. “It’s going to be better, from now on.”

He means it, and not just because the house is fixed and rent is taken care of for a year. It’s because he’s seen himself going to an extent he never thought he’d reach, for the twins; because he’s been faced with the prospective of game over and he would have taken it over risking them. Nicky can see this as a merit, can see himself as a good guardian for this at least, and the twins have quite proof that someone here really cares. It shifted the balance of all their greatest fears, indeed.

Not that Nicky would go through the experience again, now.

Andrew looks up to him and blinks. “Ice-cream?”

Nicky smiles. “I did promise you a Sundae, didn’t I?” Both kids raise their heads and he wonders, is this how the Jurassic World guy felt while training the raptors? “Come on.”

Two weeks into his recovery, Nicky sits at Sweetie’s watching Andrew and Aaron stuffing themselves with ice-cream and taking a few candid pictures of them. They sit beside the window because it’s starting to snow, though only lightly, and the twins wanted to stare as it fell and whitened the street. His chest still hurts, though it’s winding down, and his phone is blowing up with texts.

Most are from Matt asking whether he needs this or that, but one is from Dan to apologize for her boyfriend behavior. Renee writes that Andrew asked about more lessons and that she collected a few flyers from the gym where she trains at about children classes. Abby sends a picture of her dinner and promises to send Wymack over with containers of frozen leftovers so he doesn’t have to cook. Sara writes that she found a new Mexican restaurant which is actually legit and that he has to go with her as soon as his ribs allow him the wheezing that eating the extra-spicy challenge dish of the place will require.

Nicky answers all of them, except Matt because he doesn’t deserve it, and then looks down to the twins. Andrew is still a bit subdued, clearly not over his friend moving so far away and leaving no mean of contact, but he’s getting better because he’s nothing if not a resilient son of a bitch. And Nicky thinks so fully cognizant of every word. Aaron has been helping wonderfully, though he too has been occasionally poking at his brother to pick up Exy again.

Christmas is in eleven days and Nicky can think of the new pair of sport shoes for Aaron and something soft and cuddly for Andrew. He thinks of cooking food to bring over at the Wild Fox for the Christmas Lunch Wymack will hold there and he thinks of where to hide the presents so the twins won’t find them before the actual day.

Honestly, this would feel very much like a Christmas movie if he didn’t know how much illegal stuff probably happened. He’s okay not knowing, really. He just hopes Nathaniel is going to have an happy time too, this year.

Aaron accidentally elbows Andrew’s arm and causes him to smear a spoonful of ice-cream all over his face, so Andrew puts a hand on his brother’s nape and pushes him face first into his own cup.

_Okay, magic time over, let’s go back to reality. “Boys, no!”_
Chapter Summary

Everybody wanted some Christmas Fluff, so have the Christmas Fluff, but be careful because there are some heavy mentions.

WARNING for: - discussion of Drake and Andrew's sexuality; - mention of one instance of Luther hitting Andrew and mention of Tilda abusing both twins; - mention of past suicide attempt on Nicky's part; - mention of Seth's death by overdose. Yeah, Merry Christmas.

Christmas rolls around faster than Nicky can comprehend. Upside is, both Eden’s and The Wild Fox close two days before so he gets time off to run all the latest errands, which include a few stray presents, and spend the twenty-fourth morning in Bee’s study.

She smiles at him when he tries again to apologize for having her schedule a meeting on Christmas’ Eve. “It’s quite alright, Nicholas, I didn’t have any special plans for this morning. And both I and Andrew agree that it’d be better if we have this talk before Christmas, since I’ll be there too, as a friend, and that might change our therapeutic relationship. He might have to find another doctor, if he doesn’t feel me as a safe place anymore, so we wanted to at least get this closure.”

Nicky nods, because Andrew gave him a round up on that. Bee turning into a friend of his guardian might make him uncomfortable with the thought of sharing his secrets with hers, even subconsciously, so there are a few things he wanted to share before it happened, in the safe place that is her study.

Aaron is at Wymack and Abby’s, baking Christmas cookies with Katelyn and Kevin, and Nicky sits besides Andrew on the couch. Bee is placidly on her armchair in front of them, and there are three cups of steaming hot chocolate on the table in front of them. Nicky can’t say he’s surprised or upset about it.

“Andrew?” Bee calls gently. “What would you like to start with?”

They’ve put the niceties aside already. Nicky has watched Andrew happily recount of this or that thing that happened in the week, including a minor fight with Aaron over a game of Jenga and a praise from a teacher for a memory exercise. Now, though, Andrew kicks his legs off the edge of the couch and shrugs. “Lots.”

Nicky would lie if he were to say he’s not nervous, but Bee didn’t look concerned when she told him about this talk or when Andrew ended up postponing it again and again until they reached the literally last day before this deadline of theirs. He’s trying not to overthink this or freak out. He’s not really good at it.

Andrew grabs his cup and sips on his cocoa. It’s cute, because he does it like an adult might with a cup of coffee. Bee patiently waits him out.
Andrew frowns at her harder. “Bee said that it’s okay if I think I like boys, but I didn’t like what Drake did. Drake was in the wrong. He didn’t have the right to make me uncomfortable. What he was doing was not the same as two boys liking each others, because I didn’t like what he was doing.”

Nicky finds himself nodding because he doesn’t know what to add. Bee advised him to keep quiet until Andrew asked him any differently, but it’s really hard to hear him talking about what happened and not say anything.

“Liking boys—” Andrew stops, keeps frowning ever as he drinks some cocoa. “Liking boys is different. Isn’t it?”

Now, he looks at Nicky. And Nicky tries to keep his breath steady. “It is. It’s very different, ‘Drew.”

Andrew nods to himself. “How?”

Bee smiles when Nicky blinks in surprise. “Andrew has been meaning to ask about this for a while now. We talked about it some already, but he’d like to hear from another boy who likes boys. He doesn’t quite trust my word on the topic. Can you tell Nicky what exactly you are concerned about, Andrew?”

“That Drake liked boys too. And I’m gonna be like Drake because I like boys.” And then he kicks out a bit, almost at some invisible monster. “But Nicky likes boys too and he’s not like Drake.”

_Holy. Fucking. Shit._ Bee looks at Nicky expectantly, and he thinks back to an awful place. He thinks back to his therapist telling him that’s what he’ll end up doing, hurting kids; he thinks back to his parents telling him he won’t be allowed anywhere near the twins until he’s _healed._

“Andrew,” he moves a bit to the side, so that he’s almost facing his cousin, and Andrew looks up to him, for the first time tonight. “Andrew, Drake is not a boy who likes other boys, okay? I need you to understand this because it’s very important. Drake is…ill. He has an illness that makes him try to hurt little kids like you. That is absolutely not the same thing as someone loving someone else, okay? Because that is not love at all. Do you understand that?”

“But I’m a boy,” Andrew insists, and Nicky shakes his head.

“It’s not because you’re a boy, Andrew. Drake came to you because you are little. He could have gone to a girl or another boy, it didn’t make a difference to him.”

This time, Andrew’s eyes are expressive for once. Nicky wished it wasn’t because of the confusion in them. “Then why me?”

Hasn’t Nicky wondered that enough times, already. “I don’t know, ‘Drew. I really don’t.”

“Bee says—“ and Andrew looks at her, asking a confirmation that comes with a soft nod, “—that he probably tried to hurt me because he thought I wouldn’t tell anyone. Because I’m quiet and you’re not our real parent and you work lots of hours.”

It would make sense. Drake must have singled Andrew out because he’d thought Nicky wouldn’t care or be around enough for the kid to be comfortable telling him something so important. Aaron is a bit more outspoken, much closer to Katelyn, so he might have confided in someone, but Andrew wasn’t particularly close to anyone, at first sight. And his tendency to go quiet and non-verbal when stressed must have put him on the spot.
Nicky knows that’s how abusers work, but he still can’t wrap his head around how cruel their logic can be.

“But that’s dumb,” Andrew is saying, frowning harder again. “You’re home for breakfast and dinner. You always say to tell you if something hurts or scares us. Even if I’m quiet, I have the Worry Eater. So, why me?”

Because Drake couldn’t have known any of that. Because he made assumptions and acted on them. It’s the hardest part of it all, probably, to know that Nicky has no answer for Andrew’s question, because there isn’t. “There’s no why, ‘Drew. It was just... bad luck.”

Andrew stays still, thinking, and Nicky feels himself whitening under his lost gaze. He can understand his cousin’s need to find a reason, something to blame and that he can change to assure himself nothing like this will ever happen again, but the world is not so nice as to give a valid reason to every dark things that happens in it. Sometimes just being in the wrong place at the wrong time, catching the attention of the wrong person, is enough to start an avalanche.

“But liking boys,” Andrew insists, the movements of his legs stopping. “Liking boys as you do, it is different. And I won’t be like Drake.”

“Exactly,” Nicky nods, serious. “Liking boys, being gay, it’s about loving someone who is your same gender, with respect. Maybe you’ll grow up and still think you’re gay, ‘Drew, but you won’t be hurting kids. Those are two very different things.”

Andrew looks up to him, looking a bit less troubled. “How is it? Being gay?”

Oh, boy. “It’s really nothing more than liking someone who is like you. Sometimes it’s looking at someone who’s your friend and realize you’d really like to hold his hand, or it’s watching movies on the couch together and asking for permission to kiss him. But it’s really all about what you feel.”

“Abby and Wymack kiss sometimes. Can I kiss a boy too?”

“Yes, if you’d rather than kissing a girl, of course.”

“Did you and Erik kiss?”

“Yes,” Nicky says, even if the words hit him harder than he’d thought, even expecting them. “Yes, we did.”

Andrew stares, insistent. “And Erik is another gay?”

A laughter almost escapes him. “Yeah, Erik is definitely another gay.”

“And Erik was not like Drake, because he’s been alone with me lots of times but he never touched me,” Andrew declares, nodding. “So, it’s okay for me to be a gay like you and Erik.”

“That’s very correct, Andrew,” Bee adds in, smiling when he turns to her with all the facts laid out, clearly more comfortable in them. “How do you feel now?”

The kids shrugs, but Nicky can see he’s less tense than before. “I still want a boyfriend when I grow up.”

Bee nods. “Of course, you can have one. Anything else you’d like to say?”
Andrew turns to Nicky again, moving stiffly as if bracing for something huge. “Mom was mean.” Oh. Nicky fidgets a bit on the couch, unsure, but Andrew is just frowning and keeps staring. “I didn’t like mom.”

It’s as if he’s waiting for something, for a reaction. Nicky is not sure which test he’s being placed under, but he has the distinct feeling he’s not going to get a second chance if he fails now. “I know she was, ‘Drew,” he says, careful. “And I… I think it’s okay if you didn’t like her. She didn’t do anything for you to, after all.”

Andrew freezes. Then his fists clench and he turns on his knees on the couch to face Nicky fully. When he speaks, his voice raises suddenly, full of anger for a child so small. “Mom was the meanest!” he yells, and his face reddens and Nicky jerks. “Uncle Luther spanked me at dinner because I didn’t want to say his dumb prayer that said she was nice and lovely, but she wasn’t. I didn’t want to say she was, she was not, she was mean and yelled and hit! She threw Aaron at a wall! She closed me in a cupboard! She was always, always mean!”

Nicky’s brain is running a thousand miles per second. The thought that his father might have hit Andrew after he had been so clearly abused by Tilda is absolutely revolting. He feels ashamed that it took him three days to find the courage to go to his old family house, that he only went for the funeral and left the boys with his psychopath parents for all that time.

“Nobody should have hit you, ‘Drew, ever.” This is getting too heavy, damn, it’s Christmas’ Eve for fuck’s sake. “I’m sorry that they did. You’re right, they were mean.”

Andrew is still kneeling on the cushions, straight so that he’s on eye level with Nicky, and he his heavy breathing slows down a bit as he listens.

“Andrew,” Bee interjects. “Take your time. A deep breath and then you can elaborate a bit more for Nicky, okay?”

Surprisingly, Andrew obeys. He breaths in and huffs out and falls back to sit on his heels. After a long minute, he speaks again.

“You’re not mean,” he says, voice considerably lower than before. ”You don’t yell and you don’t shake us. You never hit.” He hesitates, just a split second, before adding in an even quieter voice. “I like that you don’t.”

Nicky wonders when will these kids stop breaking his heart. “I would never do something like that, ‘Drew. I promise.”

“The cookies and the stories and the playing with fingers and the kisses on our foreheads, they are — I like those,” Andrew goes on, so lowly Nicky has to strain to hear it. “I like that you are our family. You are… much better than mom.”

Aaron already said so, tired and sleepy in the middle of the night, and on a logical level Nicky had known Andrew thought so too. But Andrew is not the type to vocalize his affections, he has a much quieter way to express his feelings, and to hear the words out loud? Nicky can’t be blamed for crying, honestly.

If nothing else, seeing it makes Andrew relax further as he rolls his eyes. To Bee, he says, “I told you he would cry.”

“So you did,” she acquiesces, smiling all the while. From apparently nowhere, she materializes a box of Kleenex and Nicky thanks her quietly as he takes a couple. “It’s happy tears, though, I’m
“Of course they are,” Nicky whines, looking at Andrew who’s now back to his more standard unimpressed stare. “I am so happy you think this, Andrew. I know I still make my mistakes, but I’m trying really hard, you know that, right?”

Andrew nods. “We have the right not to be hurt,” he repeats, dutifully, and Nicky shouldn’t be surprised that he remembers that perfectly, but he’s still touched.

“That’s true,” Bee nods, gentle. Nicky is ready to call it quits, for the day, and Andrew just as much because he turns and twists to get his chocolate from the table and starts drinking it earnestly. Nicky starts hoping he’ll never turn to alcohol like that. “If that’s everything we want to say—” she looks at both of them, but neither objects, “—I’d say this was a very productive session. Our time is almost up, anyway, but I hope today eased some of your lingering concerns, Andrew?”

He nods, rather firmly. Nicky has never been this proud.

“Then I guess we can call it a day.” Betsy smiles as she meets Nicky’s tired eyes. “And quite the day, indeed.”

You can fucking say that.

When they leave the study, it’s snowing, outside.

The past two Christmases, the cousins spent alone at their flats. Nicky wrestled a tiny plastic tree in a corner of the living room, handed Andrew and Aaron golden and silver paper to cut into shapes and stripes to decorate it and cooked some Mexican food and enough cookies to give all three of them a stomachache. The presents were mostly little things, like a tiny plush or a fairytale book or drawing supplies, and despite that the twins had looked at them like gold and gems, a miracle to their eyes.

This would be their first Christmas with lots of friends and a big lunch and a semblance of family all around them, so Nicky is fretting to make sure everything is fine.

After picking Aaron up and going to the flat, Nicky leaves the twins with Roland and they barely pay attention when he tells them he’s going out again. Aaron decided he was going to make origami like those that Jay always makes for them to give to Katelyn as a present so he and Andrew are now carefully studying a tutorial video on Roland’s phone.

Well, all the better. This way Nicky can sneak out and run like a madman to buy last minute presents.

With Stuart paying off his rent, bills and hospital stay, Nicky’s bank account allowed him to pay Roland all he was due and make the twins more than a single present. That said, too many people helped him in the last months for him not to put aside a budget for them too.

He gets Matt a sweater-shaped crop-top in a pastel shade of lilac with Dream Babe written on in white, and a dark blue headband with constellations embroidered in golden thread for Dan. Some snooping around lets him get away with a desserts recipes book for Abby, who’s just as good at cooking as she’s bad at baking, and a mug for Wymack which says #BestBoss on the side and Grumpy under the bottom. Renee has been a key to Andrew’s mental health, so Nicky allows
himself a little more, buys her a thick leather bracelet with some stones of various colors encased and he has Thank You engraved in the inner side. Roland is the most difficult, and after almost an hour Nicky gives up, slips into a sexy shop and buys him a red dildo with white fluff at the base and mistletoe leaves painted on the length.

By the time he’s done and falls back into his car, he’s been out for almost half an hour and now he’s officially late on his schedule to start cooking for tomorrow. Great. And the twins said they’d help, which, bless their good intentions, is going to double the times.

At least he already got the presents for all the kids, so that’s taken care of.

When he arrives back home, Roland has a crown made of paper flowers of all colors on his head, which is absurdly cute. He looks all proud when he says, “Andrew made it for me.”

Nicky looks at Drew, who’s resolutely not looking back and just shrugs at the new flower in his hand. “Aaron was taking so long making all the flowers for Katelyn.”

“We made frogs for Kevin, Abby and Wymack. And these are the owls for Matt and Dan,” Aaron announces, pointing excitedly at all the figures already displayed on the coffee table, “Now we’re making cranes for Jean and Renee and their mom. And we’ll make fishes for Jeremy and his moms.”

“That’s lovely, Aaron,” Nicky praises. The whole room is a mess but the thought that the kids went so overboard to show some of their affection to everybody is impressive and very sweet and such an improvement from when Andrew spent his time chasing kids away from the slide so it could be exclusively his and Aaron’s. “What about your flower, Andrew?”

This time, Andrew jerks and hurriedly hides the flower he was working on under the table, then looks up to his cousin with an half blank and half annoyed look. Aaron too loses his excitement to glare at him for a moment. “What?”

Andrew turns to Roland and says, without even trying to whisper, “He is kinda dumb sometimes.”

“He is,” the betrayer nods, then he winks at Nicky. “He forgot he’s going to get presents too.”

Nicky takes a few seconds to elaborate the words. “Oh.” Oh. Oh, shit, shit, abort mission, abort, this is too fucking cute, cuteness overload, damn. He can feel himself smile, a bit embarrassedly, to the twins. “I guess I shouldn’t be looking, then?”

“It’s a surprise.” Aaron rises to his knees to point imperiously at the entrance door. “Out!”

Nicky arches a brow. “Can out be in the kitchen? Because I’ve got so much to do if we want to have food for everyone tomorrow.”

“Are you the only one in charge of the menu?” Roland asks as he raises to reach Nicky and not too subtly start pushing him into the kitchen so the kids can resume their work.

Nicky dumps the groceries on the counter. “Nah, everyone is bringing something, but I wanted to make something Mexican since Sara has been asking for a while. It means I need to make a spicy and a non-spicy version of everything, which means twice as much work.”

“Oh uh. Need a hand?”

“You are a godsend and I will love you forever.”
“Dude, a thanks would have sufficed,” Roland shrugs, washing his hands. “Gory is out tonight, anyway, so I can stay a bit longer.”

To his credit, Nicky *tries* not to frown. Gore Hawking has been Roland’s boyfriend for almost a year and a half now, which is something considering Roland’s predilection for one-night-stands before him, but he never got around to like the man. They only met sporadically a few times, when he’d come to pick up Roland’s from Eden’s, and Nicky has skipped his first name and Roland’s nickname to immediately coin the new one, Gorilla. Dude is fucking huge.

Lately, though, Roland seems a bit hesitant going home. He let it slip that there has been a couple of fights, though he never admitted to what they were about, and Nicky, being a kind-of-parent, worries.

“It’s Christmas’ Eve,” he tries to add nonchalantly, but probably fails as he is cutting onions and crying all over the place. “You could join him out?”

“I don’t know any of his friends, they’re all from Breckenridge College. It’s fine, they’re going to get wasted and yell ‘Go Jackals!’ all night, anyway.” Roland goes for a wink. “Just don’t tell him I accepted a flower crown from another guy. He might get jealous.”

“Jeez, I swear Andrew changes crush so fast I get a whiplash every time,” Nicky sighs, pretending that he is really as dumb as to fall for the distraction. If Roland isn’t ready to talk about this, there will be no pressuring. “He’s going to be a player like his cousin, when he grows up.”

“Nicky, I’m pretty sure you haven’t slept with anyone but Matt in literal years.”

“So what? That isn’t indicative of my charm!”

“Of course not. And Andrew doesn’t have a crush on me, he just thinks I’m pretty.”

“He’s seven. That’s all he needs to decide he has a crush on someone.”

“And here I thought it might have been because of my amazing baking skills.”

Nicky slaps him in the ass with the hand towel.

It’s surprisingly easy to get the kids to go to sleep.

The first year, they’d been absolutely skeptic of Santa Klaus, claiming he didn’t exist because he apparently never showed up before. Which, again, fuck you to Hell and back with a cactus, Tilda. After the two meager presents on the next morning, though, the kids had been wary for a full year before deciding to fucking set up a trap the following Christmas. Nicky blessed the sleep needs of six-years-old because if they hadn’t fallen, hidden as they were behind the couch, he wouldn’t have known how to hide the presents under the tree.

Which is why he looks at the twin with suspiciousness as they both dutifully get ready and slip into their beds. “What? No *Let’s Catch Santa* plans this year?”

Andrew huffs and turns in the mattress to give Nicky the shoulders. Rude.

Aaron yawns widely. “Abby said Santa Klaus can’t stop by if there are people awake.”
“I told you that last year too!”

The only answer he gets is a shrug of Aaron’s shoulders and a huff from somewhere in the cocoon of blankets that’s supposedly Andrew. Okay. Great. He works himself to the bone and this is the thank he gets. Amazing.

He sighs. “Just go to sleep,” he groans. He checks on Andrew first and makes sure there’s a hole to let air into the protective lump, then he stretches over it to tussle Aaron’s hair as he’s fixing his pillow under a cheek. “We need to get ready and go to Wymack’s tomorrow, so we better be well rested.”

“I want cake,” Andrew mutters, and Nicky can see one of his eyes in the opening through the sheets.

“I think there’s going to be pudding, actually. Good enough?” Andrew takes a few moments to think of it, before nodding hard enough to make the whole structure of his den tremble. “Good. Now, sleep.”

He still stays up an hour to make sure the twins do fall asleep, willing or not, before digging the presents out of the highest shelf of his wardrobe and arrange them carefully under the tree.

He goes to sleep immediately after, feeling the lost hour of sleep like an eternity on his shoulders. Christmas is fun, and he’s absolutely sure that this is going to be much funnier than all of his past put together, but, man, is it going to be a full time job to keep track of an whole bunch of kids high on new toys adrenaline and sugar rush.

Nicky almost dies, on Christmas. He almost dies because somewhere along the line the twins got comfortable enough with him to decide that jumping on his stomach with a scream was a good method to wake him up. Actually, Aaron does that; Andrew climbs the bed and starts jumping on the mattress to get Nicky’s terrified form to move.

“Jesus Christ,” Nicky whispers, in awe at his own survival, as his heart still thumps violently in his chest. “Are you trying to kill me?!”

Aaron stop pushing at his belly to lean over his face. “It’s morning! It’s Christmas! We have to go!”

“What? What time is—” Nicky whines all his pain when his eyes find the clock. “Aaron, it’s half past six.”

“The presents are already there,” Andrew supplies, as if that was the big deal.

“Yeah, well, they will still be there in another hour.” Nicky physically lifts Aaron, who squeals in delight, and then turns on his stomach. He grabs his pillow from where it fell on the floor during the sneak attack and pushes it firmly onto his own head. “I’m going back to sleep.”

“What?! You can’t!” Aaron or Andrew or both, Nicky doesn’t have enough brain cells awake to find out, start pushing at his sides and shoulders. When that doesn’t gain the wanted results, the kids move to try and steal his pillow away. Whatever, Nicky lets it go and grabs his sweatshirt from the night table to use instead. “Nicky!”
“I’ll let you know, waking up poor working people at ungodly hours of the morning counts as being naughty. You’re not starting the new year on a good leg, kids!”

“The new year starts with January,” someone — Andrew, this is a Andrew reasoning — says. “Everything is fair in between Christmas and New Year.”

Nicky lifts his head to frown at the twin, Andrew indeed. “Who told you that?”

“Roland.”

_Fucker._ “Well, I don’t know if Roland is on the Nice list this year, so maybe you shouldn’t listen to him.”

“Roland is an adult, he doesn’t go on the list,” Aaron huffs, rolling his eyes. “Come on, Nicky! We can’t open the presents without you! You said that’s a family thing!”

Nicky is halfway to burying his face back into the mattress when the words hit him. Damn. Do the kids really think these things or have they just realized they can get their cousin to do whatever they want when they drop bombs like this on him? That’s a legit doubt.

He fakes a cry into his sweatshirt, but of course that grants him no mercy so he sighs and pulls himself to sit up. “Okay, okay, you win. I’m coming.”

He gets his ears pierced by shrieking sound and then the twins are off and out of his room again.

_Nicholas Esteban Hemmick, your spine is made of jelly-o._

Oh, well.

Just to be a bit of a shit, he detours to the kitchen first and the twins moan and complain and call out to him as he fixes himself a coffee and a Christmas cookie. Because he deserves it, okay? It’s a quarter to seven now. God, how he already misses his bed.

In the living room, the twins have already pulled the presents out from under the tree and lined them up on the coffee table. Nicky watches them sort through which are whose as he sips coffee on the couch. Finally, they are done and sit beside him to stare in awe.

“We got three each,” Aaron whispers, voice almost reverential.

Nicky smiles and caresses his head. “You must have been extremely nice, this year.” Aaron nods as if that’s a given. Nicky wants to laugh, but he forces himself not to. “So, who starts?” and he’s barely said so that they hear the sound of paper ripping.

Andrew stares at them in defiance. “You were taking too long.”

Fair enough.

Andrew picked the smallest of his presents first, which turns out to be a package of colored markers with glitters inside. They are arranged by tone so they look like a rainbow and he looks at Nicky with a conspiratorial look that makes him giggle. He examines all the tips before placing them back carefully in their box.
Aaron grabs his smallest one too, probably following the children logic that the bigger the toy the better. It’s nothing more than school supplies, to be honest, but Nicky made sure to get him notebooks with ‘secret’ pockets in the inner cover and colored sticky notes and he goes crazy over each of them. He will be color coding for real in no time, that’s for sure.

The middle-sized presents are opened at the same time. Car toys are an easy hit, for everyone, and Andrew seems to love the sleek model of the Batmobile, though he asks if he can color on the batman logo because it apparently ruins the aesthetic of the fast model. Nicky, who knows absolutely nothing of cars, shrugs. “We can get black stickers to put on it, if you want? That should work.” Andrew’s eyes lit up as he nods seriously, then he goes back to examine every inch of the car.

In the meanwhile, Aaron has already opened and put on his new shoes. “They fit me!” he yells excitedly and Nicky assures him he even looks quite dashing with the black and yellow model, he will be the most handsome on the court. Aaron preens under the compliment.

The bigger presents are a bit of a nervous breakdown for Nicky because they are the same for each twin and also potentially a huge miss. He wanted to go for toys but he’d feel bad getting them plushes since the Worry Eaters have turned into the official protectors of the children’s room. He’d gone for the next best thing and he watches the twins rip the paper away with big gestures.

Andrew manages to reach the inside first and he immediately smashes his face in the softness of the fuzzy blanket. He lets out a please sound as he hugs the beige thing to his chest and actively tries to be absorbed by it. He’s so into it, Aaron is the first to notice. “Are these sleeves?! Nicky! The blankets have sleeves!”

Nicky is quite sure sleeved blankets aren’t as amazing as the advertise seems to think, but he’s also quite sure, after having witnessed the twins stomping around the flat wrapped in sheets like Romans in togas, that for these two children in the specific they are a dream come true.

Indeed, Andrew immediately checks to see if his has the sleeves too, and two seconds later he’s got it all wrapped around himself, looking subtly pleased with himself. There’s also a pocket in between the sleeves and he shoves his markers there before picking the car up and starting to make it run all over the couch. The sounds are so soft and quiet Nicky has to strain to hear them, but he is definitely making engine noises with his mouth. How adorable is that?!

Aaron is a bit less invested in his dark red blanket, which he leaves on the couch, but that’s because he’s mostly busy walking back and fort staring at his new shoes. Which aren’t tied and Nicky’s brain is getting anxious about the loose laces.

Before he can tell anything, though, Aaron sucks in a sudden breath and widens his eye. “Andrew!” he calls, distress clear in his voice, and Nicky freaks out again.

“What?” he tries, but the twins are doing that thing where they stare at each others and make movements with their heads and hands to convey something. “What’s going on?”

Andrew turns to him with a frown. “Close your eyes.” Nicky blinks. “Close them!”

“Jeez, okay, give me time. If you draw on my face, though, I won’t be happy.”

Nobody draws on his face, though Andrew’s expression, when Nicky opens his eyes again, says he’s been considering it. Nicky looks in his lap to find something wrapped badly in newspapers. Oh.
“For me?”

Aaron and Andrew are now staring attentively, looking quite eager for a reaction, so Nicky, careful as he can, rips the paper off to reveal the content.

He logically knew it’d be a flower crown, of course, but he is still impressed. It has probably twice as many flowers as Roland’s, though they’d been attached with stick glue and will probably fall at a certain point, and they are in a random assortment of yellow, pink, baby blue and purple. It’s an adorable fashion disaster and Nicky wants to wear it forever and ever and to be buried with it when he’s old and gray and dead.

“This is so pretty,” and he’s not faking the way his voice trembles just enough. “Who helps me put it on?”

Andrew looks content where he is, on the floor hugging his car toy, so Aaron stretches on his tiptoes to place the crown on Nicky’s bent head. “You look cute,” he says, nodding to himself, and Nicky blows him a kiss.

It’s too early in the morning to do anything but sit on the couch and waiting for a few hours to pass, so Nicky sits in between the twins and lets them use him as a playing surface.

Since they were so much early, it’s honestly no surprise that they end up being late, as always. Andrew takes a long ass time to be wrestled out of the blanket and into proper clothes, then Aaron takes a long ass time to be wrestled out of his new shoes. These two always choose the best things to be unmistakably twins in, uh?

Nicky gives Aaron a bowl of mashed potatoes to bring, and Andrew gets the bag with all the carefully crafted origami for their friends. He himself struggles to balance two huge trays and locking the door and opening the car and overall it’s a miracle the food made it to the vehicle, really.

The drive to the Wild Fox is filled with Christmas songs from the radio that make Andrew look constipated and Aaron dangle his head to the rhythm. When they get there they are, unsurprisingly, the last ones.

Matt comes to open the door for them and Nicky seems him getting excited already through the glass. “Nicky! That crown is adorable!”

“See? The twins made it for me!” He plays up the pride in his voice just to see Aaron skip in his steps, clearly happy, and Andrew nod to himself. “Everybody else already inside?”

“Of course,” Matt lets the kids in first and then takes one of the trays from Nicky’s hands. He’s wearing a baggy red Christmas sweater with white snowflakes on and someone put a pair of fake antlers on his head, which is absolutely lovely. Nicky steals a peck from his lips, just because he can.

When he turns, Aaron is dutifully passing the potatoes to Abby and Andrew has instinctively migrated to where Renee, in a lovely green dress with ample skirt, is chatting with Bee, who’s wearing jeans for the first time since Nicky met her. Both ladies immediately turn to the kid and Nicky giggles at the sight of Andrew showing off his car.
“Compliment his toy,” he hisses to Matt as the walk to the kitchen. “He likes the car but not the Batman logo.”

“Another car lover? I have a new favorite twin, Nicky, say sorry to Aaron from me.”

Wymack is running around in circles around the stove, when they get there. Sara is sitting on the counter and offering useless advice as she sucks on a candy cane, while her wife is apparently the only one who’s usefully contributing if the way she’s tinkering with the decorations on a pudding means anything.

Nicky’s entrance with more food is welcomed with a cheer of joy from Sara and a groan from Wymack. “This is too much fucking food,” he grumbles. “I’m not even sure the kids all eat all this stuff!”

Matt pumps a fist in the air. “Leftovers for everybody!”

“Get out of the kitchen, you two morons!”

“This is the swear room,” Laila informs them. “Since the kids are banned because of the stove, swear words are allowed here. But only here. Abby promised repercussions if any cuss gets out of these walls.”

“Sounds fair,” Nicky shrugs, helping Sara put the trays above the stove. “You just need to warm them up real quick before serving them, nothing else. And for the love of God check the fucking side of the tray, I wrote which is the kids’ and which is the adults’ there and I’m not spending my Christmas calming down a bunch of crying babies.”

Wymack scoffs at his words. “You have too high expectations for the day.”

Yeah, Nicky kinda knows, but it’s always nice to hope at least.

The presents exchange happens after eating, which is a feat in itself with how often all the children try to guilty any of the adults into letting them open at least one. In the end, the twins’ origami gain an whole lot of approval, and Nicky finds out Andrew made a bee for Betsy which she absolutely loves. As for himself, he bought all the kids fuzzy non-slippery socks in various colors and with various animals on top and it’s just a matter of a few minutes before all of them have shed their shoes off.

He sees a few of the presents the twins get, but probably not all because it’s chaos, but he’s seen that Renee’s gift for Andrew has been a roll of taping gauze and the promise of lessons which Matt excitedly jumped onboard of too. Aaron got some kind of letter from Katelyn, together with a bandana from also Kevin to wear during practice. Dan bought both of them matching shirts, in a pastel shade of orange with *The Better Twin* on the back, and Abby got them new backpacks for school, which leaves Nicky feel very guilty.

“That’s too much! We said *little things*!” he hisses at her, but she pretends not to hear because of Jingle Bells playing, *softly*, in the background. “I’ll get you back for this.”

Sara and Laila got every kid a charm with a string to attach it somewhere. Nicky thinks Andrew’s and Aaron’s might be foxes but the kids whisk them away too fast for him to get a good look. He sees that Kevin’s is a stuffed crown and he looks absolutely delighted. He’s also wearing a green
tutu, which apparently took Wymack three weeks to find on the net and barely arrived in time for Christmas.

“It’s going to be a feat to get him to take it off,” he’s grumbling now to the other adults, as they all sit at the mostly cleaned up table and spy at the bunch of kids playing twister on the other side of the room. “Ugh, and that material starts smelling so fast too.”

“First practice he has, he’ll take it off,” Dan assures him. “He knows he can’t get on the court without the proper gear.”

Sara is taking a secret picture of Jeremy, who’s been eliminated already and is hanging onto Jean’s arm to beg him to let him back in the game, when she clicks her tongue. “Uh uh, Nicky, code yellow? Doesn’t look red yet, to me.”

Nicky, who’s been drinking water to wash down the three glasses of wine that Dan has sneakily served him, turns in time to see Andrew marching straight to him. He was sitting at the sideline of the twister sheet last time, so for a moment Nicky fears a fight, but then he spots his expression and relaxes a bit.

“Break time?” he asks gently when Andrew gets close enough, and Nicky lifts him up so he can sit on his lap and nestle against his chest. “It’s okay,” he says, mostly to the other worried adults’ benefit. “We’re just taking a few minutes for ourselves before rejoining the others, uh? We need to recharge.”

Andrew hides his face in Nicky’s neck and wraps a hand around his middle finger, then he goes lax and sighs. Nicky starts to rock him gently, shaking his head discretely when Abby gestures if he needs to bring the kid in the changing room, which has been equipped with a blanket and a few pillows in case any of the children needed a nap. The other people resume talking, if at a slightly lower voice.

The thing is, Andrew doesn’t need a nap. He just needs a moment away from people, as he often does after long periods of time in company. Indeed, after a ten minutes or so, Andrew gently kicks at Nicky’s knee to be put down. As soon as he’s on the floor he nods to his cousin before scurrying back to the others. He still sticks close to Aaron, who instinctively takes his hand to hold, but he looks once more interested in the game.

Nicky shakes his head before turning to the rest of the table. Only now he realizes there’s silence around him. “What?”

Betsy smiles at him, a genuine gesture that feel very motherly. “I’m just pleasantly impressed,” she assures. “It’s quite hard for Andrew to display his affections, even more so with an audience. He must feel really safe around you.”

Oh. Nicky blushes a bit. “Nah, he’s just a bit grumpy. Social interactions make him tired so he needs a time out every now and then.”

He doesn’t think he said anything wrong, so there’s no need for the long drawled sigh that Abby lets out. “See, Betsy, that’s what I was talking to you about,” she chirps, fake happy, as she picks up her glass. "What’s your diagnose? Low self-esteem?”

Matt pipes up. “High self doubt?”

“Stress?” offers Renee, indifferent to Nicky’s betrayed glare.

Even Sara, who’s met him only a handful of times in her life, shrugs and offers, “Impending need
“Hey!” he and Matt exclaim, at the same time and equally offended.

Dan snorts.

They kids have all droopy eyes by the time everything has been tidied up and it’s okay to go home. Andrew and Aaron are huddled together with Katelyn and Kevin, but they don’t seem to be doing anything but trying to stay awake with jerky motions of their heads. Jeremy gave up long ago and is sleeping with his head on Jean’s shoulder. Jean, for himself, is valiantly holding himself up against the leg of a table not to fall face first into the floor.

Oh, well, bedtime won’t be hard, for once.

Nicky is grabbing the twins jackets when Dan appears behind him and slips something in his pocket. He jerks, surprised, but she shakes her head at him. “Call the number tomorrow morning, okay? I don’t wanna say anything, but it might be a good news.”

Nicky arches a brow at her, but she leaves before he gets to press for answers. Not that he would get them, probably, but still.

He ends up having to carry both twins and leaving the trays at the shop to collect another day, so Dan’s crypticness fades from his mind fast.

Andrew and Aaron wake up at midnight. Nicky knows because he hears them chatter in the living room and he goes up to check on them.

They’re huddled on the couch, each in his own blanket and holding their Worry Eaters as they much on a plate of the leftover cookies from today. Nicky shakes his head fondly at the sight.

“How are you going to wake up tomorrow?” he asks, and isn’t it something? That neither of them jumps in fear?

Andrew defiantly takes another bite off a pine tree cookie. “It’s the holiday. We can sleep in.”

“Sleeping in, wow, that sounds so amazing. You got me, gimme a cookie.”

He has to get himself a cookie by fighting valiantly for it, and resorting to tickling Aaron into giving one up, but then he finds himself sitting in between the twins, their heads resting on his thighs as they absentmindedly watch a re-run of The Grinch with Jim Carry.

They fall asleep not much later.

Nicky wakes up around eleven and he’s so fucking impressed because Andrew and Aaron are still
deeply out. He even manages to slip them off him without waking up, which is a feat in itself.

He fixes himself some coffee as he checks his phone, finding it full to the brim with pictures of the
day before sent by all the others. There’s one of him cuddling Andrew that he hadn’t noticed being
taken and he saves it because it’s fucking cute, especially since he still had the flower crown on his
head. He scrolls through some more before getting to one of him and Dan kissing each one of
Matt’s cheeks and he remembers her order.

Retrieving the note from his jacket is easy enough, but Nicky hides in the bathroom to make the
call so he won’t wake up the kids. Sure enough, there’s only a phone number on the paper and,
really, it’s only his faith in Dan that prevents him from just throwing it out.

The phone rings twice, before a rich woman’s voice answers. “Matt’s fuckbuddy?”

“… What?!”

“Yeah, it’s you. You’re popping on my screen as Nicholas Hemmick, is that right?”

“Uh,” Nicky frowns, holding the top on his nose between two fingers. “I realize this is weird
because I am the one calling, but who am I talking with?”

“Pft, Dan, always the same.” The woman laughs and Nicky can hear a tingling sound and then the
noise of cars moving. “Well, Nicholas, I spent the night fucking, I woke up two hours ago and I just
got out to the world of civilization again to find out it’s snowing again; let’s just do this fast so I
can get home and sleep. I’ll be over at your place in half an hour more or less.”

“Wait what?!”

“As for who I am,” the woman makes a sound with her lips, like smacking them, and Nicky
wonders if she’s been putting on lipstick while talking to him. “Consider me your very own
Miranda Priestly. Now get ready, because I have high standards.”

She hangs up on him before he gets to refuse.

Of course, Nicky hurries up in moving the kids from the couch to their beds, and they barely stir
even as he picks them up and manhandles them around so he should be safe even with someone
walking around the place and talking. As soon as they are set, though, he calls Dan.

“I promise you, she is much better than her first impressions let on.”

Nicky stops, mouth open, for a moment. “How did you know?!”

Dan laughed, languidly. “Oh well, she just left our flat.”

Whatever Nicky might have expected from Professional Exy Coach Danielle Wilds’ official
fuckbuddy, that was not the gorgeous woman that rang his doorbell exactly thirty minutes after
their call.
She has long blond hair, blue eyes, a model’s body and ten inches high heels of black leather and golden decorations. She’s wearing a black skin-thigh dress that touches the ground but has a huge split to the side and is absolutely nonexistent on her back, leaving bare both her shoulders, her spine all the way down and her perfectly visible Venus Dimples. Everything is probably of some high brand, included her perfume, and, seriously, there’s *money* written all over her. Nicky would classify her as the trophy wife of some kind of loaded businessman, if it weren’t for the commanding aura in every inch of her, in the way she walked and looked around and arched her perfect eyebrow at the mess on the couch.

“I have kids,” Nicky defends himself, as if he wasn’t part of the reason for the cookie crumbles all over. “And I wasn’t expecting visitors, anyway.”

“That I would hope so,” she scoffs, throwing her hair behind her back in a gesture that has some kind of practiced routine to it.

Nicky can safely say he’s never been gayer. He wants to pick this woman up and throw her out of his apartment, and only knowing that Dan has to have seen something in her is keeping him from doing so.

Unless, he thinks a bit unkindly, Dan saw her cleavage and her brain short-circuited completely.

“Okay, can I at least know your name or are you going to just act as if this was your home just like that?” he asks, crossing his arms and trying to discretely keeping an eye on the closed door of the twins’ room.

The woman smiles. She’s probably Nicky’s age, maybe a couple years older, but she looks like a cat ready to pound on her pray.

“Reynolds,” she introduces herself, offering Nicky a hand for one of the firmest shakes he’s ever felt, holy shit. “Allison Reynolds. Now, where’s your room?”

Nicky is still discretely shaking his hand and indicates the room with his chin out of habit, before realizing everything. “Wait, why do you—”

Allison is already in his room, and Nicky groans before hurrying up in following her in. She’s made a beeline for his wardrobe and has both doors open in front of her.

"I’m going to go through your wardrobe, Hemmick.” As if he couldn’t tell.

“What for?”

“My parents are loaded pieces of shit,” Allison says, distractedly, as she pulls things out of his closet to examine them. Then she throws them behind herself, and Nicky blinks, appalled. “Just a few weeks ago, my dad communicated me he’s putting me in charge of all our fashion-related businesses. This includes a couple fashion houses, an important magazine and a few lines of underwear. I am looking for a personal assistant.”

Nicky’s head is spinning from both the attitude and the words of this lady. It takes him a while to muster up a frown, in fact. “Listen, if this is about the old dear stereotype of the fashionable gay man, that’s the door. It’s late, I’m tired and not in the mood for—”

“I had a boyfriend, in college,” Allison interrupts him, not moving her eyes from the wardrobe but neither throwing the thing she has now in her hands away. Nicky recognizes it as one of Erik’s shirts, a big black tank top with a tiny symbol of homosexuality in rainbow above the heart.
Something, maybe her voice, maybe how lost she looks, maybe the careful way she’s handling Erik’s stuff in her hands, mollifies Nicky a bit. “A boyfriend?” he pushes, and she blinks, almost coming back to herself.

“She,” she says. "We were in for the long haul, but we weren’t steady. We fought continuously, we broke up and got back together, on and off, never a break. And don’t get me wrong, he was an asshole. He was aggressive and prejudiced and jealous and a lot of other things. But I thought he was the one, you know? The person that one way or another keeps coming back for more.”

If not the verbs in her words, the tone of her voice would have forewarned about the unhappy ending coming and Nicky still feels raw from Erik’s departure, so he steps closer to the bed and just sits there, waiting.

Allison turns to him, stares for a moment, and then clenches her hands on the cloth. "We loved each others, but he loved mixing his antidepressants with alcohol more.”

Oh shit. “Allison…”

“It was bound to happen,” she stops him, resolute. “Everybody had told me. I kept checking his pockets for stuff before we went out clubbing, but, I don’t know. Maybe he pissed off someone, maybe he managed to trick me. He overdosed in a bathroom of a discotheque in my second to last year of college.”

Nicky took twenty seven pills of various kinds out of his mother’s first aid kit, once, when he’d just come back from conversion therapy. He’d thought the chances were high enough for the mix to kill him even if he had no idea of what he was doing. He’d held onto them for two hours in the bathroom, then he gulped them down, then he immediately shoved two fingers down his own throat to spill them out. He washed everything away, ran to his room and sat on the ground, back against the wall, panting and terrified that maybe he was going to die, that he maybe he wasn’t. When he’d lived through the night, he’d realized it was just going to happen again as long as he tried to fight himself and live a lie, so he’d packed his things and left his parents’ house that very afternoon.

“Depression is a bitch to fight with,” he whispers. “I’m sorry for Seth.”

“You’re only sorry because you never met him,” she corrects, then chuckles as she offers him the tank top back. “He was a raging homophobe, he would have flipped if he’d known I was into girls too. And my parents would have flipped if they’d known I had a black boyfriend. He was one of those people that nobody liked. I didn’t either, at first. He was hot, I just wanted a fuck. Took me a long time to see there was more underneath.”

Nicky thinks about that. “You’re right, I probably wouldn’t have liked him,” he admits, because he’d be an idiot to try to lie about this. He’d left lots of people throw crap at him in the past, so now he’s the kind of person who flaunts himself and fuck others. Seth sounded like the kind of guy who would have made Nicky’s high school life hell.

Allison snorts. “No shit.”

They stay quiet for a while and Allison turns back to survey the wardrobe again, this time with less destructiveness than before. She pulls a few things out, pairs them around, then places everything back inside. Nicky is almost glad when she pulls out the Call Me Baby, Daddy crop top, because she arches her brow at him and he shrugs, says tips and they both start laughing. The air clears up a bit.
Allison throws the top back inside with a disgusted flick of her wrist.

“Dan told me some about you and your little monsters. And the kids’ mother.” She turns to him, serious once again but more in the way of when she walked in, all authority and challenge and commanding nature, rather than defensiveness. “Don’t be mistaken, this is not pity. This is me going, goddammit, finally someone with a spine! Someone I can trust not to buckle under pressure just because life dealt them a shitty hand once; someone who gets bad cards and just bluffs himself out of the mess until the next round. And I want that.”

For a moment, Nicky doesn’t answer. It feels surreal that this woman might be here, in his room, and commandeering his life as if he didn’t have much of a say in it; but at the same time it feels surreal how much the simple story has drawn him to her. He settles for, “I have no idea what a personal assistant does. I haven’t even finished high school.”

“That’s great because I don’t really want an assistant,” Allison huffs, kicking off her heels to move and sit by Nicky’s side. “My parents are pieces of shit, I told you. One day, when I’ll have put aside enough money and locked enough allegiances with important people, I will turn my back on them and cheerily wave a middle finger in their faces as I build my own empire from the scratches.”

She smiles like a huge feline, a tiger or a panther or something equally good for smashing and slicing and killing, as she puts an arm around his shoulders and squeezes him. “In the meanwhile, I can’t wait to shove into their face my new assistant, the Mexican gay single father who could easily over-parent them both under a table.”

Nicky frowns, though there’s a tiny smile tugging at his lips at her fierceness. “I don’t think that’s how—”

“Hemmick,” she stops him with a glare. “I’ve got more money than I could spend in my whole life and that’s coming from someone who owns not one, not two, but three Porsches. I’m fully aware of how much of a bitch I am and I would pay accordingly for you to put up with that.”

Shit. Nicky would love to reply to her that it doesn’t matter to him, but he’d be lying and she probably knows it very well. Indeed, she has both eyebrows arched at his hesitation. “I don’t know,” he tries to say and she shrugs.

“You don’t have to tell me now, of course.” She stands up, picking her shoes from the floor with two fingers. “I’ll call you back for an answer after New Year, how does it sound?”

It’s almost a week, which is not much to decide whether to upturn his whole life on a gamble, but it’s something. He nods.

“Great. I’m getting out of your hair now,” she says, slipping out of the room barefoot. “And keep the Daddy top. That could make for a sweet power move, one day.”

“You couldn’t have warned me or anything, could you?”

“Allison is, how can I say?, peculiar?”

“A catty bitch.”
“That too. I wasn’t sure she would have liked you, but I was certain she wasn’t going to if you’d tried to impress her. She’s just like that. I’m glad you two worked it out.”

“I haven’t said yes yet, Dan.”

“Let’s be real, Nicky. If you don’t, Wymack and Roland will for you.”

"Nicky, Nicholas, buddy, really hot friend of mine,—“ Roland grabs him by the shoulders with more strength than necessary considering Nicky is the one who asked to talk and they’re both sitting in the kitchens at Eden’s before opening time, “—tell me you said yes.”

Nicky tries to avert his eyes discreetly by staring at the twins as they show Jay all the pictures of their own creations.

“Jesus Christ, Hemmick!”

“I asked time to think about it!” he hisses, hoping the kids won’t notice. "Jeez, don’t y’all look ready to throw me out of here, wow, I can really feel the love, guys.”

“Dude, it’s not that and you know it,” adds Josh, one of the bodyguards who actually helped chasing away Nicky’s attackers and who’s been especially overprotective of him, lately.

Roland nods, before sitting back down besides Nicky. "It’s just, okay, you’re twenty something now, you can do this with the occasional hiccup, but let’s be real. Did you really think you could do this your whole life and support the twins too? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love this job, I’d love to do this for the rest of my life. And I have the utmost faith in Aaron getting himself a scholarship, but what about all the other expenses? And what about Andrew? How do you expect to get him through college running yourself to the ground here?”

Nicky rolls his eyes. “Andrew is already planning on dropping out from High School, I don’t think college is in his plans at all.”

“Honey,” Roland sends him an unimpressed look. “He’s seven and he hates math, of course he’s planning on dropping out at sixteen. Come on. He probably even thinks he’s going to live off cookies when he gets a place of his own.”

"You say that as if you think he’s not going to do just that.”

“Nicky.”

“Okay!” He huffs. The twins are preening as Jay makes exaggerated expression of awe and wonder at their newly acquired skills. "It’s just…” Jesus, this shouldn’t be an hard decision to make. "I mean, this place was what saved me when I was at my lowest, you know? It feels ungrateful to just walk out at the first better option I get.”

“Now you’re being a dumbass,” Josh informs him, dispassionately. "A sentimental dumbass, but still a dumbass.”

“Hey!”

"You’ve got kids, Nicky,” the man says, serious and firm as when he’s keeping troublemakers out
of the line. "Your loyalty better go to them, over everyone else."

Doesn’t Nicky know that.

He sighs, shakes his head. He passes a hand through his hair, but, honestly, he can be honest and admit he was asking for an opinion just because he was hoping someone would give him a good reason to refuse that he might have accidentally missed. “I’m going to miss you all, guys.”

“Oh come on, you’re coming back as a customer of course, don’t be an idiot.” Roland bumps their shoulders. “And you’re not firing me as official baby-sitter, I hope, you ungrateful jackass.”

“Alright, can you show your support without adding an insult every three other words? Thank you.”

Josh laughs as Roland smacks a wet kiss on Nicky’s cheek. “No can do, my disaster gay buddy.”

“Oh, fuck you, Roland.”

He doesn’t mean it.

“Hemmick, I don’t know if you’re aware of the invention of calendars, but I assure you this is earlier than New Year.”

“I have conditions.”

“What the fuck else do you want that you can’t buy on your own with all the money I’m going to pay you?!”

“Fixed hours, a schedule, and no last minute overtime, no making me stay the whole night on a whim. I am home until school time in the mornings and I am back at a reasonable time for dinner in the evenings. If I need to stay any longer, you tell me in enough advance so I can find a babysitter, and you pay me the extra hours. I have children, Reynolds; I’m not turning into a shitty parent for them just because you want to get your complex financial revenge on yours.”

“Jesus Christ, this is all? I told you, Hemmick, I don’t really want a PA, I don’t trust anyone but me to organize my work. You’re going to be just a pretty face hanging at my elbow most of the time, and if I need you to do something I can surely make you do it during your hours. You happy now?”

“Just dandy.”

“Good, because I already bought you three suits for work. You need to go have them fitted tomorrow or the day after, I’ll send you the address. We still start after New Year, though.”

“Great to me.”

“Perfect. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to get back between Dan’s thighs. Good day.”

“Lucky her.”

He hangs up just before Wymack bursts into the back room and yells at him that his break is over, and just because you’ll stop working here in a few weeks it doesn’t mean you get to slack off
So Nicky slowly empties his locker at Eden’s, collects everything of the twins from the apartment above the club and retrieves those few things he’d left around at Wymack’s coffee shop. He feels very nostalgic as he loads the car with all those things, but Roland kicks his ass — actually, he slaps it, when Nicky is bent to arrange things around in the backseat — and tells him to stop being a dumbass.

“Don’t worry, Nicky,” Matt tells him as he picks up his very own Wild Fox mug, the one Wymack has customized for every employee who ever joins the stuff. Nicky’s name and the number 6 stare at him like a jersey of some kind. “Allison is going to send you back here to buy her coffee five times a day for sure. We’ll see each others lots and lots!”

“That supposed to make me feel better? Because it doesn’t. At all.” He’s lying.

Whereas it’s true that in the past days he and Allison have spent most of their time fighting and getting deranged by poisonous banters, Nicky has to admit he feels better falling into the lines of his new job. Which, he has kind of understood now, mainly consists in acting as Allison’s impulse control when she gets the need to do something murderous in her parents’ regards or toward some of their associates. Sometimes, it also implies making lots of salacious comments about rich people, which Nicky is very good at. Soon enough there will be actual bureaucracy to deal with, but for now it’s all under control.

He will even have a few days to adjust to the job before the kids resume school, so he’ll employ Roland and try and see if they can get the whole thing going with this new schedule. Which allows Nicky for hours of sleep every night. Crazy.

Matt hugs him and Nicky drives to get the kids from the Alvarez-Dermott house so they can all go home. The twins don’t look happy to see the stuff in the car, but they have already been reassured that Roland will keep coming to see them and Nicky will take them to meet Josh and Jay and all the others too. As it is, they help carrying few of the lighter items upstairs with not too many complaints.

Nicky has them make a grocery list as he puts everything away and comes back to find them both stringy intently inside the fridge. For now, the list held tightly in Aaron’s hand contains candies, ice-cream, fries and chicken nuggets. “What would Kevin say if he saw this?” he jokingly asks, and laughs when both twins send him a disgusted look in response.

They fix dinner together and then put on a cartoon on TV. Nicky sits on the couch surrounded by the twins as the head credits start showing up.

“With the new job—“ Andrew asks, not looking away from the screen and keeping his voice low, uncertain. Nicky puts a hand on his head to reassure him, “—can we do this every night?”

They always dined together recently, but Nicky usually left early enough with rare exceptions so lazing around on the couch after dinner or playing for a few hours before bed was more of a rare occasion. With the new schedule, hopefully, that won’t be an issue. “Yeah, I think we can.”

Andrew hums something and then snuggles closer. Aaron lays his head on Nicky’s side. “Can we have a later bed-time too?”
“Absolutely not, don’t try to trick me, buddy.”

“But you—“

“I finally get an earlier bedtime, so unless you want me to move it a couple hours before…”

“No!”

“Thought so.” He ruffles Aaron’s hair because he can, because Aaron doesn’t get scared from it. He remembers what Andrew said during his session with Bee and he stops his hand on the nape, gently massaging there as if he could banish the pain of every hit he ever got. Instead of crying as his brain is trying to convince him to do, he pulls both kids closer and squeezes them enough to elicit some grumble from both. “Let’s just watch the cartoon, okay? I’m still on vacation!”

Vacation or not, Nicky falls asleep during the movie. He wakes up when the twins push at his shoulder to make him get up because, though reluctantly, they admit it is time for bed. They do so yawning. Nicky tries not to act too smug about it.

He helps them in their pajamas and to brush their teeth, then he makes sure Andrew gets well cocooned in his blankets and tucks Aaron’s sheets.

“Goodnight,” he says, but Aaron’s hand snaps and grabs his wrist. “What?”

It’s hard to tell in the dark, with only the nightstand lamp on, but Aaron looks a bit red as he asks, in a low voice, “Stay?”

The twins are seven. Technically, they are old enough to— Oh, fuck it.

“Of course,” he lays on the outer side of Aaron’s bed and outstretches an arm so that Aaron can use it as a pillow and Andrew can cover his hand with the blankets and hold onto his fingers in the safety of his den. “I’m not leaving.”

Aaron mutters something, something that sounds suspiciously like “I know,” before he falls asleep, out as a light in less than ten seconds. Nicky chuckles at it, and squeezes Andrew’s fingers a bit to let him know he means it.

Nicky, too, falls asleep shortly after.

It’s a night with no bad dreams for anyone, for once.
Andrew vs Crushes and Experiments

Chapter Summary

Andrew’s essence is that of a Disaster Gay and he therefore was bound to end up making some kind of mess like this. I would know, I’m a disaster gay. Featuring: Aaron being half supportive and half a little shit because that’s what brothers are for.

AKA: A new arc, Teenage Twinyards. Tweenyards, if you want.

Arc II: Teen Age

At the ripe age of twenty-seven, Nicky has the knees of an eighty years old man and roughly the same will to deal with bullshit of every kind, especially after spending the whole day fending off Allison’s bad mood so it wouldn’t ruin the business.

The whole week had been a mess, what with Reynolds Sr stopping by on Monday for apparently no reason at all except complaining. Oh, and giving the stinky eye to Nicky’s desk and the pasta-and-pebbles frame on it, filled with a picture of him and the twins at eight, the first time he got to take days off and bring them on a vacation to the beach.

For the past five days Nicky has carried out meetings in Allison’s place when possible, or kicked her ankle, hard, when she had to be present and wouldn’t stop being pissed, so now he’s ready to collapse on the couch, propose delivery pizza — which would be an unanimous yes, the twins are twelve, of course they love pizza — and then fall into a deep slumber.

Which is why it shocks him a bit to enter the apartment and be met with Aaron laying on the couch, a book on his chest and an unexpected sentence on his lips. “Andrew tried to dye his hair.”

Nicky stops. His brain examines the sentence, word by word, and then comes up with a blank slate because, what the fuck.

He sighs. “Should I worry more because Andrew’s entering a body-modifications phase or because you specified tried to?”

Aaron shrugs. “The results are… questionable.” He sighs, lowering the book in his lap to pull himself up to sit. “Kevin asked Thea out today.”

Ah, shit. Nicky grimaces. “Andrew saw it?”

“It was after practice at the recreational centre. The whole team saw it, and Andrew was on the bleachers waiting for me.”

Double shit. Andrew’s love life kept collecting a disappointment after the other. Kevin had seemed
like the perfect childhood friends trope coming to life, just as for Aaron and Katelyn. Except that where the straights were slowly falling into a more tender trope of holding hands secretly when nobody watched, Kevin had apparently gone and asked a girl out. Great.

“Who’s this Thea anyway?” He tries not to make it sound like, she surely can’t be better than my son, really, but Aaron’s arched brow says he failed terribly. “What? Andrew is absolutely delightful.”

“Andrew’s concept of romance is staring at the people he’s got a crush on from afar and then being mean to them if they notice,” Aaron replies. He steals a look to the closed door of their shared room, before sighing. “Thea is the second best striker on the team. She and Kevin have been fighting for the top spot for the past months. They’re the power couple of the team, now.”

*And triple shit.* “Does it get any worse or are we done?”

“It’s over.” Aaron hesitates. “I mean, if we don’t count the mess of Andrew’s bleached head, now.”

“He bleached it?!”

“Yeah, it didn’t go as he hoped.” Nicky groans as Aaron stands from the couch with a long sigh. “Can we order food out? I think he could use a pick-me-up.”

No joke. “Order pizza, I’ll check on him.” When Aaron passes, Nicky pats his back.

Growing up didn't separate the twins at all, no matter how much Nicky feared so as they began middle school and Aaron affirmed himself as a nerdy jock and Andrew slumped in a more amorphous emo category. Apparently being as different as night and day couldn’t touch the unbreakable bond between them, luckily.

When he gets to the twins’ door and knocks, he’s kinda expecting a bit of resistance at first. Andrew has never been known for happily admitting to any kind of weakness or mistake and embarrassment is difficult for him to deal with. Surprisingly, though, Nicky can hear an invitation inside at his first try, which can be both good or bad, depending on something he has yet to identify.

He’s met with the familiar sight of a slump of blankets, covers and the duvet. How can Andrew not boil to death under all that stuff it’s beyond Nicky’s comprehension.

“Hey,” he tries, and gets the impression of a leg kicking in his direction under the cloth. Okay. “Aaron told me about Kevin.” A muffled groan. “And the hair.” A louder one.

Okay, so it’s bad. Nicky steps forward to sit on the side of the bed. When he outstretches his hand to try and pat what he thinks is Andrew’s head, the lump struggles to avoid contact. “‘Drew.” No answer.

He waits for a while, long enough that Aaron pops his head in to ask for their orders of pizza. Nicky orders his usual pepperoni and then, death in his heart, tells Aaron to order a pineapple one for that heathen of his twin. Aaron looks just as disgusted, but sighs and complies, leaving and closing the door gently behind himself.

Nicky pats the mattress again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No.”
“Okay,” Nicky sighs. “Just know that, it hurts now, of course it does, but it’s gonna get better soon, alright? I mean, Kevin and Thea are fifteen and sixteen, you know how many relationships at this age last? So little of them! They might even broke up before next semester or next month. Hey, maybe even by next week!”

Andrew’s arm sneaks out of the cover to punch at Nicky’s knee. Which is very rude, Nicky is trying to help, here! But after that even Andrew’s head pops out and—

“Oh, ‘Drew.”

It’s a mess. Whatever Andrew was trying to do, it looks now halfway between an abstract painting made of red and white stains or the result of a seagull shitting on a red-haired head. It’s a splotchy disaster if Nicky ever saw one.

And Nicky worked for years in a gay night club, okay? He saw things.

“What did you do?” This time, when Nicky outstretches his hand, Andrew lets him pass it through the locks, which now feel dry and ruined to the touch. If he sniffles a bit, Nicky doesn’t mention. “Did you really use bleach?”

“They do in books.”

“Yeah, and you’re never exposed to the visual result in books, so why would you trust those!” Nicky watches his fingers going slightly red as they touch the painted locks. “Damn, this is some serious damage. What were you trying to get? Fire red?”

Andrew slaps his hand away with an annoyed motion, and the sound covers the word that leaves his lips.

Nicky frowns. “What?”

His cousin is fidgety, which is weird. It takes Andrew a few minutes of playing with his fingers and aborting his own nervous ticks of running a hand through his hair before he sighs out, “Pink.”

“Pink?”

“Yes,” this time, Andrew looks fighting. “Pink.”

Well, that’s a bit of a surprise, but okay. Nicky blinks. “Alright, why didn’t you tell me?”

Andrew rolls his eyes. “You wouldn’t let me dye my hair.”

“Of course not, you’re twelve! And a disaster gay, which means I should have expected some color that needs full decolorization like pink.” Still, Nicky sighs. The mess done, he needs to find a way to fix it. “Let’s do this. I’ll call Renee tomorrow and see if she can come and help us savage your dumb head,” he sneakily manages to ruffle Andrew’s hair as he says so, and his cousin growls but submits to the punishment. “And she’s making you blond again.”

Andrew bristles. “But—!”

“No strange colors in middle school!” Nicky declares, trying to sound firm. “Color dye ruins your hair, you know?”

“Renee has rainbow hair.”

“Renee is an adult and can decide for herself. You’re still a little brat. I’m pretty sure there’s
something in the school code about dyed hair, anyway.”

Andrew scoffs. “I thought you read that.”

Nicky scoffs right back. “I’m a functional adult, I skimmed it. You’re the one with the eidetic memory anyway, you should know if it’s allowed or not!” Judging by Andrew’s flickering expression and the consequent silence, and going out on a limb, Nicky would say the rules of the school are not favorable to colored hair. “See? No colored hair as long as you’re in middle school. Now come out of your den, the pizza must be almost here.”

“What if Aaron makes fun of me?”

Nicky would say it’s probably unavoidable and Andrew kinda earned himself that, but that’s not what a responsible parents does so he shakes his head. “I’ll confiscate his pizza if he does. He can eat the leftover vegetable soup. What do you say?”

He says nothing, but the look in his eyes says Andrew is considering his chances at getting his hands on Aaron’s confiscated pizza, if that scenario were to play out. Nicky smacks lightly on the covers where he thinks Andrew’s side must be and then he stands up.

Not without grunting and complaining, so does his cousin after a while.

Twelve is still rather on the short side, for the twins, Nicky considers as he watches his cousin reach his stomach and little higher. Maybe he’s feeding them the wrong things? Or maybe their father was quite short too? Who knows.

Nicky lets Andrew pass him and then follows him out. Sure enough, Aaron is setting the table as he waits for the delivery. When he looks up, though, he immediately pushes his lips in a thin line.

“Nicky said I get your pizza if you laugh at me.”

“I a hundred percent did not say that, but still, Aaron, don’t laugh at your brother.”

“Why not?!?” Aaron points at the disaster head as if wasn’t already the most attention-catching thing in the whole apartment. “He made a mess!”

“You’re a mess!”

“Oh, no, I’m the functional twin, remember?”

“I’ll give you functional—”

“Alright, knock it off,” Nicky says, though he’s half sure the main reasons the twins do stop is the buzzing of the intercom that announces the arrival of the pizza.

Sure enough, Aaron hurries to the door almost as fast and Andrew hurries to the kitchen to hide from sight. Nicky takes the moment to text Renee real quick and recover for a moment.

Homemade pink hair dye. Sure. How could it have gone wrong, indeed?

Renee’s reputation as a saint holds on not only because she shows up Saturday morning with a bag of hair supplies, but also because not for a moment she looks like she’s going to laugh at Andrew.
Instead, she offers him a knowing smile.

“I did an even worse mess at my first attempt, if it makes you feel better.”

“You’re lying, so it doesn’t,” Andrew says, doing that thing with his eyebrows and lower lip that he denies being a pout but it’s absolutely the cutest pout Nicky’s ever seen. It’s how the twins got out with most of their mischief as kids, to be honest. And still now, actually. Nicky is a weak man, okay?

“I’m not,” she assures, leading him to the bathroom. “My hair are naturally black. Can you imagine the mess with bleach and poorly applied dye? At least you’re blond.”

Nicky doesn’t hear the reply, but Andrew’s shoulders shrug a bit and he lets the two disappear into the bathroom as he sorts through the colors for the laundry. Andrew’s stuff is quite easy, to be honest; it’s all black and it goes on its own. It’s only Aaron’s stuff that is half colored and half white and therefore has to be divided.

Aaron who, in the meanwhile, is scrolling through cat videos on his phone. Nicky knows he hates those, but Nicky also knows Andrew loves them, so he keeps quiet and lets Aaron do his own selection.

If at any point Aaron stands up and casually strolls to the bathroom, and if later there’s the muffled sound of Renee’s laughter coming from there, Nicky is not going to mention not complain, but he is going to smirk for a while.

Andrew’s hair look miraculously blond again when Renee’s done with them. Nicky can’t stop thanking her as he accompanies her to the door, ignoring how the twins are wrestling for Aaron’s phone, and the pictures of Andrew’s shame in it, in the living room.

“I’m so glad you were home visiting,” Nicky whines as she waves away his gratitude. “I don’t know what I would have done if you were still at college.”

“It was a lucky coincidence, indeed,” she smiles, shaking her head at something that Nicky can hear happening behind his back but is not ready to face yet. Give him a break. “If it were to happen again, tell Andrew to call Jean. He’s almost as good as me with hair dyes.”

“Hoping the lesson sticks and he doesn’t try it again anytime soon, yes, I will do just that!” Nicky shakes his head, though, and there’s an endless supply of fondness in his heart. Look at his cousin! Andrew, antisocial by principle and with all his baggage, messing up with hair-dyes like any queer kid ever. “He’s such a disaster gay, I love him.”

Renee chuckles as she leaves. Nicky will never get over how sweet that sound is. Whoever she’ll love will be a damn lucky person.

“Did you just bite me?! You bit me! That’s so gross, Andrew, damn it! Nicky! Andrew bit me!”

*Renee, come back, take me with you.* Nicky sighs, leans his temple against the door to get some support and then turns and puts on his Responsible Adult face. “Hey, no biting other family members! Aaron, send me those pictures and then delete them!”
Warning: there's vomiting in this chapter, it's basically a sick-fic about Nicky caring for Aaron so be careful if you're squeamish about it.

Also, there's lesbians being awesome in this.

As a general rule, Nicky tries his best to be present and invested to the twins’ interests. That means showing up for parent-teachers meetings, listening to the long rambles about this or that around the table at dinner, asking questions and going to Aaron’s Exy games. The one notable exception is Andrew’s MMA training.

He tried, okay? He went once to watch him train with Renee when he had a day off, before she left for college. He’d spent the whole time trying not to yell in fear and resisting the urge to cover his eyes and mutter, I can't watch this. He can’t help it, Renee and Andrew are very intense when they fight. Now that Renee left, Andrew continues his practice with her instructor at the gym, but Nicky still can’t bring himself to go back.

“It’s not even a real fight,” Andrew points out once, but Nicky sends a long stare at the blood dripping from his nose and doesn’t deign him of an answer.

If he is to be completely honest, though, Aaron’s matches aren’t much nicer.

Technically speaking, tackling is forbidden in Little Exy, which supposedly would mean kids should have an harder time injuring each others or themselves. Bullshit. Nicky saw Aaron himself tripping another kid into slamming face first against the plexiglass, and the referee didn’t even give him a yellow card. The little shit was sneaky.

Now, surrounded by yelling parents, stuffed in coats and nursing two thermos of respectively coffee and hot-chocolate, Andrew and Nicky watch the impending doom of Dan’s team. Aaron and the other back-liner are doing their best, the strikers are well coordinated and the dealer is good too, honestly, but the goalkeeper, Jack, is a mess. Aaron has been bitching about him for a while, but Nicky only now realizes how bad it is: every time the ball soars past the back-liners, it’s in; the dude is terrible at his role.

He’s also, apparently, the only goalkeeper they have.

Again, the buzzer goes off as the door lights up red. Nicky can almost lip-read the curses falling off Aaron’s mouth. Even Andrew, as Exy intolerant as he is, scoffs in disgust. “It was so clear it’d go left.”

“Was it?” Nicky asks, trying to offer a justification for the poor goalkeeper. “I didn’t see it.”

“Number seven has been shooting left every time she has Jean on her right. She’s less afraid of Aaron because she’s taller than him.”
Nicky didn’t notice. Though, to be fair, Nicky doesn’t have an eidetic memory.

He risks a look to his side. Andrew’s glare is fixed on the game, though he’s nursing his hot chocolate like a treasure in his lap. He doesn’t look nervous about the result, as other parents are, even though fifteen-to-eight is not an honorable loss, but he scrunches his nose every time the ball goes in for both teams.

At the sixteenth goal, the referee has to call a time out because Aaron marches to Jack. Luckily, one of his teammates intercepts him before he can get himself disqualified for starting a brawl with his own teammate. Differently from Andrew, Aaron is not a fighter and he tends to keep his confrontations on an insult-only level; that he was ready to throw hands means Jack is really pushing all of his buttons.

To be fair, though, that had looked like an hard shot to stop, to the very edge of the top right corner. Andrew, once again, frowns. Nicky elbows him slightly. “Think you could have stopped it?”

Andrew blinks. He takes a sip of his chocolate before answering, low but clear. “Yes.”

Nicky nods, and sips from his coffee.

He doesn’t want to push the topic. Andrew’s past experience had been traumatic and in no way Nicky was going to pressure him to get into a situation that makes him so uncomfortable. Also, Andrew doesn’t lie when he says he hates Exy; he couldn’t care less about the sport, and Kevin’s obsession with it makes him go crazy. He barely tolerates having Aaron’s stuff around him and he constantly changes the channel when they stumble upon a match on TV.

At the same time, he knows he’s not imagining the annoyance on Andrew’s face when he sees a goalkeeper — any goalkeeper, not even just Aaron’s — failing an action in goal. Or when he sees a striker cheer after a goal. He hates the game, but he absolutely loathes losing at something he deems himself good at.

Nicky turns back to the court. There’s only five minutes left, so he’s already thinking up a consoling speech to give Aaron. His cousin and all his teammates still fight teeth and nails, but it’s clear that Jack’s given up completely because he doesn’t even move to stop the ball that hits the wall at barely an arm-length from his racquet and slams the seventeenth point on the board.

The buzzer goes off and Aaron throws his helmet on the ground. Sitting in the first row, Kevin looks ready to commit murder, but Dan stops him before he can start yelling at Jack and forces her players all to line up for the handshake.

“He wanted to be a striker,” Andrew says. Nicky blinks at him. “Jack.”

“How do you know?”

“Attitude,” Andrew says, and doesn’t explain. He just stands up, fills the cap-slash-cup of his thermos with chocolate and waits to meet Kevin’s eyes, when he unavoidably turns to look for him, before chugging it down.

Nicky can see the other guy bristle before all but running to the locker rooms to complain at Dan. “You know, you can be a real ass sometimes.”

“Kevin’s a real ass all the time. Let’s go, Aaron’s going to want to get kebab for dinner. No onion, no spicy sauce.”

“I know your twin’s order, ’Drew!”
Andrew accidentally steps on Nicky’s foot. Damn asshole.

Aaron shovels his kebab down his throat during the pauses of an hour long monologue about Jack’s jackass-ness. Jackass. Apparently a lovely new nickname.

“He’s just so fucking full of himself,” he growls, lips covered in oil. “He can’t even stop a fucking ball, but he goes around claiming he’d be a fucking champ if he could play striker. Stop complaining and do your job, Jackass! Ken and I are doing thrice as much to pick up his slack.”

Kevin looks disturbingly green as he stares at Aaron’s meal, but he wisely decides not to comment and instead chews on a slice of his pizza. Abby looks delighted that he’s learning to pick his battles. “He would be a decent striker, probably.”

“I don’t care! He’s not a striker, he’s a goalkeeper!”

“Only because you don’t have any decent one and he is the only one with experience in that position,” Jean points out. His French accent smoothed out a lot in the last few years, but there’s still an exotic curl to all his R’s and an hiss to his X’s. “He was dumb accepting it, but you don’t have any other option, right now.”

Even though Kevin and Jean grew out of Little Exy when they started high school and joined their own team, they’re all sitting around a table in a kebab joint that Andrew found two years ago and turned into their usual post-game hang-out place. The owner recognizes them, by now, and brings them a free chocolate pizza every time he guesses a loss by the kids’ long faces.

“Nobody new signed for the team?” Nicky asks, trying to appear supportive. “Usually a few new kids show up with the beginning of the new school year.”

“None who plays goalie,” Dan mutters, chewing. “We don’t have anybody else but Jack.”

So she says, but her eyes fall on Andrew for a moment. He ignores her and she lets it go.

Kevin, of course, does not. “Andrew could beat him ten-zero if he returned.”

“Kev,” Wymack tries to intervene, too well aware of Andrew’s reasons to avoid the sport. Kevin doesn’t know as much as Aaron or Jean, and it’s both a luck and a curse because he doesn’t get what he’s talking about when he hounds on Andrew.

“You hate watching him play!” he complains, all fifteen-years-old rightfulness.

“Correction, I hate watching all of you play, with two exceptions.” Andrew replies to him with his mouth full, mostly because everybody knows how much it peeves Kevin when he does that. “Aaron, because I have to as his brother, and Jean, because I have to so I can trash-talk him to Renee.”

“That’s a lie!”

“It’s not,” Jean comments, voice even and expression of cold indifference. “My sister and Andrew use trash-talking as an active fighting technique.”

Kevin glares at him.
“Exy is boring,” Andrew concludes, picking up his soda to take a long gulp. Kevin’s sparkling water is judging him. “And so is your whining. Nicky, can we go?”

Nicky rolls his eyes. “You aren’t even done eating. Wait until you can actually make a dramatic exit before speaking, next time.”

Kevin falls against the back his chair, sulking, and huffs. “I know it pisses you off to watch Jack.”

Andrew shrugs. “So does watching you.”

If Kevin is going to say something else, Jean doesn’t let him and puts an open palm to his mouth to shut him up. “You’re going to get yourself punched in the face, one day,” he admonishes. Nicky deems it a luck that it had yet to happen.

Andrew chews leisurely on his food, while Aaron pulls bites off as if he were imagining it to be Jack’s arm or something. Which Nicky really, really, hopes he isn’t doing because he has no idea how to deal with a cannibal kid.

The mood improves slowly during the rest of the meal, as Aaron and Kevin de-stress and Jean offers Andrew a couple anecdotes about Renee’s college life which he could use as psychological warfare during their fights. Nicky and Dan exchange looks throughout the whole night, letting their eyes fall to Andrew every now and then, and by the time they are getting ready to leave she asks him in a low voice if he is going to meet up with Matt anytime soon.

Nicky thinks about it.

The new job has lots of pros, among which that he is out when the twins are at school and not in the evenings so he gets to spend time with them. The downside is also that, since he and the twins are always at home at the same times, he’d have to give up time with them to meet with Matt. He hasn’t gotten laid at all since the new job started, but he couldn’t say he is so desperate as to give up on time with the kids.

He shrugs. Of course, he’s told Matt he can find someone else since Nicky won’t be able anytime soon, but it seems he hasn’t found anyone else yet. Which is, admittedly, flattering at the very least.

They all go separate ways soon enough, since Wymack has to go pick Katelyn up from a birthday party and he is getting antsy about it. Jean goes along with them and Nicky and the twins drive Dan home and wish her goodnight.

Aaron sulks the rest of the drive, still, but he doesn’t pick up Kevin’s argument and Nicky offers him a proud one-armed hug when they get off the car, before he goes to get his bag from the trunk. Andrew stares, but says nothing.

It is late enough for the sky to be pitch black and Nicky fusses all the way to the entrance door because Aaron refuses to wear his scarf for such a close distance. Andrew steals it and wraps it around himself.

Loss nights have a certain ritual to themselves, which includes the twins’ sleeved blankets, hot cocoa or tea, cookies and a movie with lots of explosions and both female and male protagonists for the sake of both twins. The positions change often, and tonight Nicky ends up on the armchair watching and the twins sit on opposite sides of the couch and spend most of the times kicking at each other’s feet in the middle rather than following the movie. Too bad for them, Pacific Rim is great.
Aaron collapses first, exhaustion taking over, and Andrew huffs. Nicky has to throw a piece of cookie at his head to stop him from kicking his twin awake again. The second piece he throws, Andrew catches with his mouth and chews smugly. Nicky snorts, and fifteen minutes later Andrew is out as a light too.

The sleeved blankets they got at Christmas when they were seven are still the twins favorite snuggly-thing, so Nicky picks both of those and cocoons the twins on the couch before gently coaxing them to stumble half asleep to their own beds. Aaron takes the time to lay his blankets on top of his duvet, while Andrew just slips under his still wrapped up. One day he’ll cook in his sleep, but Nicky has given up on that argument.

He wishes them goodnight and gets grunts in return. Damn brats.

Aaron is as efficient in getting ready in the mornings as Andrew is in grappling for every second he can spend under the blankets before Nicky forcibly pulls them off the bed.

There’s a lot of working out done in the mornings, in their house. Running for the bathroom, running to breakfast, running for the bus, running at work. Nicky’s physique is amazingly well kept for someone who hasn’t practiced real sport in so long, to be honest. He thinks worrying might burn calories too. He asks Allison as they ride the elevator to her office.

She flips her hair behind her shoulder with a hand. “You need a vacation, Hemmick.”

“Good thinking, and who’s going to go buy you all your terribly expensive coffees, then?”

“You think I don’t know you drive an extra five minutes to pick all my coffees from Wymack’s shop?”

“They’re good, and the cashier is an eye-candy.”

“Get to work, dumbass.”

Nicky does. He double checks Allison’s agenda for the rest of the week, checks the market trends for her fashion houses, and the gossip newspapers and twitter accounts to get the dirt on a couple people she’s going to have a meeting with in the afternoon. He takes not of the new dates for a postponed event and a newly announced one, and then gets started on the reports of the selling for all the magazines in Allison’s care. There’s an improvement of more than one percent on all of them this month, which is really good. He makes a note for her to send her congratulations to the staffs, to keep the moral high.

The phone by his side buzzes. “Hemmick, you’re friends with the Alvarez-Dermott, right?”

Nicky stares uncomprehending at the thing as if Allison could read the confusion on his face. “Uh, yes? Their kid is friend with the twins.” Well, with Aaron, at least. Andrew seems to find Jeremy’s unending optimistic energy too draining for his emo-goth full-out-darkness-and-void brooding self. “Why?”

“Exy Today made an article about the some of the married players bringing kids to the games, one of those cutesy selling things, and conveniently forgot about the girls. Get me in a room with those two, I want them to model for an whole collection. Gimme the lesbians, Hemmick!”
“I think I should point out you’re a bisexual yourself, Allison.”

“Yes, but I am not a professional Exy player. They are. Let me shovel this down Moriyama’s throat. He thinks he’s such hot sit because he took over daddy for the Exy magazine? Ha. I’ll show him true nepotism.”

She cuts the communication off before he gets to reply. Oh well.

He tries to imagine the old Reynolds’ face when he’ll see the shots for the new collection. He’s torn between really wanting to see it and taking a day off to get himself as far away from the explosion as possible.

On a post-it, he writes the groceries he’ll need to pick to make something tasty and spicy enough to get Sara to agree to this plan.

Jeremy is only one year older than the twins, which means it’s his last year of middle school and he’s still on the team, differently from Jean and Kevin. He made captain this year, and he looks overjoyed that they came to visit as if he doesn’t even notice Andrew’s annoyed stance, hands in his pockets and head deep in his shoulders. Aaron is bouncing strategies off him and Jeremy tries to defuse his annoyance whenever Jack gets mentioned. Nicky leaves them be.

“Sounds good to me,” Sara says through a mouthful of enchilada. Laila elbows her in the side and she finally swallows before adding. “It’s not like we care much about the spotlight, but Jer really expected to see us on the article too. It was hard for him to realize his moms don’t count as family, for Exy Today.”

“He’s not showing, of course,” Laila adds, rolling her eyes. “You can give Miss Reynolds my phone number, just tell her to call past six and I’ll make sure to answer so we can get the details down.”

“Sounds great,” he nods, and finally bites on his own share. God, he missed making spicy food. Damn the twins’ weak tastebuds. “Any other news?”

“There’s a new cute boy on the team. Bets are he’s one of us gays, care for an introduction?”

When Jeremy asks why his mom’s cursing in Spanish, Nicky tells him she accidentally spilled enchilada on her shirt. Sara pinches him on the butt, hard.

Andrew is fuming when they’re leaving the Alvarez-Dermott household. Nicky opens his mouth to ask as they are approaching the car, but Aaron kicks him in the ankle before he can.

Alright, he can the hint, jeez.

Allison works fast, Nicky can give her that much. She calls Laila the very same night Nicky passes
the number along and a week later she has both girls on a photographic set, clad in pinks and beiges and reds as they sport the new spring collection.

His gay heart swells at every blatantly sapphic pose Laila and Sara pull off, and he sips on his coffee not to laugh at the expressions of a couple stage assistants. One of them is a furiously blushing girl whom Nicky bets will have quite the wet dreams tonight.

Allison, besides him, takes a deep satisfied breath. “Do you hear this sound, Nicky? It’s the noise of my father’s coronaries rupturing and my mother’s rings clinking against the glass as she chugs down wine. Isn’t it marvelous?”

“Uh uh,” Nicky pretends indifference, but he’s smiling. A lesbian inter-racial couple on the cover of Allison’s magazine. He can’t wait to see the reactions. “Do you want me to get you a celebratory champagne bottle already or are we waiting for their call?”

“Book me a table somewhere fancy,” she says. “Make sure they serve spicy food and get a table for four, for tonight. Can you come along or should I find myself a plus one? I think Dan should be free.”

For all she acts like an annoying asshole, Allison has been extremely attentive in respecting Nicky’s conditions for the job. A work dinner so suddenly is not enough forewarning for him to get the twins set for the night, but he might do an exception this time. Roland is already with them and Nicky knows things between him and Gorilla are going south again, which means Ro is actually over sleeping at the flat above Eden’s more than he is at his own place. He’d probably love the chance to stay over with the twins, and the last time Nicky went out with fellow adults was Christmas, almost two months ago.

“I might join you, this time,” he says, pulling his phone out to text Roland for confirmation.

Allison pats his back with a bit too much force. “Well, someone pinch me, my reclusive PA is actually going to join in some socialization. Am I dreaming?”

“Fuck you.”

Nicky does not, indeed, join the dinner. Instead he gets a sudden call three minutes after he sends Roland the text to be frantically told that Aaron has a fever.

It’s early enough in the afternoon that Nicky would need to stay over for another three or four hours at least, but he gets a shiver as the words fill him in.

Allison shoos him away when he stumbles into the room to tell her what happened and Laila and Sara, on break apparently, offer to ask Sara’s sister to come pick Andrew up so he spends the night with Jeremy and doesn’t risk getting whatever virus Aaron has.

Nicky is hesitant but Laila insists. “It must be this intestinal bug that’s going around at school. Happens every spring, I promise. Just let us do something nice for you, Nick. Jeremy will love spending some time with Andrew, I’m sure.”

Last time Andrew and Jeremy spent some time together, though, Andrew left the house furious and sulked for three days. This is not exactly the most relaxing set-up Nicky can think about.
But, to be fair, Roland said Aaron was puking his guts out so maybe Andrew would prefer Jeremy’s endless chatter to sickness and puke. Eh.

“Thank you,” he says, a thousand times and once more as he’s running out of the set.

Roland looks disheveled and nervous as he lets Nicky in. “He looked fine when I picked him from school, but when we were tidying up he suddenly ran for the bathroom. I thought maybe it was something I cooked but neither I or Andrew feel any bad.”

“Seasonal bug, probably,” Nicky reassures as he takes off his coat and shoes. “Better for you two to run while you’re still sane, though.” To Andrew, who’s staring at him from the couch, he says, “Jeremy and his aunt are stopping by in a few to get you, you’ll spend the night over, okay? I know it’s sudden, but it’s the best option so you don’t—”

“I’m not getting Aaron’s germs,” Andrew declares, making a disgusted face and sprinting from the couch to his room. “I’m making a bag for the night. Don’t let him out of the bathroom until I’m done in the room!”

“He doesn’t have the bubonic plague, ‘Drew!”

Though, Nicky admits as he opens the bathroom door, he kinda looks like it.

Aaron is curled on the bathroom rag in front of the toilet bowl, hair plastered with sweat to the pale skin. His eyes, when they focus on his cousin, are wet and hazy. “Nicky,” he whines, painfully, and Nicky’s heart tugs.

“I’m here, buddy, I came as fast as I could,” he promises. He kneels on the floor to try and get Aaron to at least sit up, but the minor movement is enough to make the kid flash to the bowl again. Nicky makes a face at the retching sounds, but doesn’t hesitate in leaning over and taking Aaron’s hair so there won’t fall in his face, for short as they are. “Okay, okay, okay, I’m here, it’s going to be fine, just fine.”

“I couldn’t find any stomach medicine around,” Roland mutters from the door. “Want me to run to the store to get some?”

“Check out the highest drawer in my dresser, first.” He moved all the meds there so they’d be out of reach for the twins when they were little and never got around to make a new first aid kit for the bathroom even if they’re technically old enough to know better than chugging disinfectant, technically.

Aaron whines pitifully and Nicky flushes the toilet to get rid of the stench. When Roland comes back, he has Aaron gathered one his crossed legs, curled against his chest, and he has to coax him with hushes and reassurances to make him take the pill and the water.

“Think he’ll be able to hold it down?” Roland asks, nervous, and Nicky shrugs.

It’s not the first time the twins are ill, but it doesn’t happen often. They both seem to have been blessed with strong immunity systems, and those few times they were ill Nicky had been the one home to deal with it. He used to take days off from both works when either or both kids were ill, and he’s not going to change it now. Allison already knows so.
“We’ll see what to do if he can’t,” he whispers.

He brings Aaron’s arms around his neck and, with a bit of difficulty, he manages to pull him up in his arms. When they leave the bathroom, Andrew is back to the couch, with a duffle bag on his side. He sends a look in their direction that, for all his claims at disgust, is quite worried and hesitant. Nicky waves him with a hand.

“We’ll be fine,” he promises. “Nothing some rest can’t take care of.”

“If rest was enough, you wouldn’t need to give him medicine,” Andrew points out, frowning because that’s what Andrew does. Nicky should be used to this, by now, but still finds himself sending his cousin a deadpan look. “He’s gonna be a doctor. Let him have this.”

“Whenever Jeremy arrives, it will never be too soon.”

Roland sends him a look that was probably supposed to be amused, but still holds too much worry for that. Nicky lays Aaron in his bed and wraps him up with as many blankets as he can. Aaron whines and coughs once, twice, thrice, but doesn’t throw up again. Good.

Nicky leaves Roland to sit on the side of the bed to go pick up a basin to put by the side of the bed, and when he returns Andrew’s hurriedly leaving the room and his blanket has been added on top of Aaron. Aww, so sweet.

Aaron whines, rather than appreciate the gesture, so Nicky ruffles Andrew’s hair as a thank you gesture before he returns to Aaron’s side. He’s barely sat down when the doorbell rings.

“I’ll take it,” Roland stops him. “It’s probably Jeremy’s aunt anyway, right? I can accompany Andrew downstair and I’ll go buy a couple things for the little patient. Do you need anything?”

Nicky shakes his head. “Just pick some ginger tea for Aaron, it usually settles his stomach.” He himself has always personally considered that beverage as an insult in its own existence, but if that’s the kind of person Aaron has decided to be, okay, Nicky will do his best to support his disgusting tastes.

Andrew is still staring from the door, for all his disgust from before, and he steals one last look before following Roland out. Nicky feels bad for making him leave so hastily and not even accompanying them outside, but Aaron starts shaking in the bed and his whines turn into sobs.

“Aaron, buddy, what is it?”

“Hurts,” Aaron weeps. His arms are curled around his stomach, so Nicky can guess that’s what’s paining him.

Carefully as he can, he starts rubbing soothing circles on Aaron’s back with his open hand. Slowly, after a few minutes, Aaron’s body relaxes enough that Nicky can make him turn a bit and move his massage on his belly instead.

Twelve. Nicky can’t believe the twins got so big already, yet he watches his hand cover so much of Aaron’s body and he’s reminded violently of how little the twins are for their age. Not for the first time, he wonders if Tilda had assumed something during the pregnancy, like maybe some light drug or alcohol which might have impeded the twins’ growth, but Abby visited them both and said she couldn’t find anything leading in that direction. If Tilda used anything when the twins were still in her, some miracle made so that they weren’t affected.

Nicky almost laughs out loud. Tilda and a miracle in the same sentence, as if.
Instead, he kisses Aaron’s forehead when his eyes go droopy and gently wishes him to sleep with soft hushes and whispers. His skin is still hot, so they’ll have to take the temperature, later.

Roland arrives shortly after, a bit out of breath as if he’d run all the way back. “Andrew is with his friend,” he reassures in a low voice as Nicky joins him in the kitchen to check on what he bought for Aaron. “He didn’t look much happy about it, but the other kid had enthusiasm for the both of them.”

“I’ll have to make up to him,” Nicky jokes, mostly to ease Roland’s still apparent nerves. When it seems to fail, as proven by the fact that his friend’s hands flounder and tremble and almost drop everything they pick, Nicky sighs. “You know it happens, right? I mean, they’re twelve. Middle school is the germs’ paradisiac amusement park and kids at his age are, a, disgusting, and, b, with a shitty immunity system.”

Roland’s chuckle isn’t enough. Nicky hip-checks him, and he returns the gesture, finally regaining some bright. They get a soup started and make enough ginger tea for a battalion, but neither acknowledges it.

“You can go home, if you want,” Nicky offers. “Allison gave me the rest of the day and tomorrow. You don’t have to stay.”

Roland shakes his head, but the motion looks more instinctive than really thought out. In fact, he bites his lips and asks, “Are you sure?”

Nicky thinks he should be the one asking that. Roland’s boyfriend had never been that funny of a person, but he was also the only one Ro stuck around for. After that bit of a break up years ago, they had gotten back together after a few months and since then there have been ups and downs but no more separations. At least that Nicky knows. He still has no idea why they got back together the first time, but this is all there is to it.

And Ro keeps sleeping over at Eden’s every so often, keeps delaying going home, keeps looking on the verge of saying something and then changing his mind. Nicky has hypothesized the worst, but his discreet peeking didn’t find any bruises or marks. Begrudgingly, he’s accepted to wait for Roland to open up on whatever is going on.

“I’m sure,” he says, because he is, but he also adds, “You don’t have to go if you don’t want to. You could stay over. I’m going to sleep in Andrew’s bed anyway, so you can have my room.”

Roland’s fingers slow down for a moment in their practiced motion of stirring the soup, but he ends up shaking his head. “No, it’s okay. I have some stuff to do, anyway, I can get ahead of schedule if I get started today.”

Nicky is not sure he believes that, but he nods anyway.

Aaron wakes up when Roland closes the entrance door behind himself.

Nicky joins him on the bed with a tray of soup, crackers and tea, and after respectively a spoonful, a bite and two or three sips he just lays down too. Aaron looks pitiful, all curled up and pale but with flushed cheeks. The temperature seems to have dropped a bit, at least according to the thermometer, but not enough for him to feel any better yet, apparently.
At a certain point, curled against Nicky’s chest and wrapped in blankets, he says, “Make it stop.”
Nicky holds him closer.

After the second dose of medicine, Nicky gets a cold wet towel to place on Aaron’s forehead, which seems to make him feel at least a bit better, and they curl up together again.

Nicky scratches gently at his nape and starts singing soft lullabies under his breath. He only knows a couple in English and broken pieces of one in Spanish, but his parents were never the kind to sing him to sleep and he has no intention of singing church hymns to his cousin. He resorts to the next best thing, which are Disney movies songs and Christmas chants. Aaron giggles tiredly, though, so that’s a win.

His cousin falls asleep trying to hum along to *Under the Sea*.

Despite what they say in the brief call they have before bed with Andrew, their night is not so good. Aaron keeps waking up to retch, even though he has nothing left to give, and Nicky can only make him drink little sips of tea and lull him to his chest until he falls asleep again for a little longer.

By the time morning comes, they’re both exhausted, but Aaron’s fever has dropped a bit and he slowly sucks on the orange slices he’s given for breakfast. Nicky kisses his forehead to reward him and he sighs, a bit content and a bit tired. He goes back to sleep pretty fast after that.

Nicky takes the chance to call and check in on Andrew.

Sara’s sister, Daniela, answers immediately and brightly assures him that Jeremy and his cousin spent whole day playing in the garden yesterday. Nicky tries to picture it and fails spectacularly.

“Please, don’t hesitate to call me if anything happens,” he hurries to add. “I can come pick him up earlier if you need.”

“Nonsense!” Daniel hushes, somehow fond. “The kids get along like house on fire, you don’t need to worry about them. See you later!”

Nicky wonders if literally anyone in the Alvarez-Dermott household has the same bright attitude as Jeremy. He doesn’t think even he could survive so much, let alone poor Andrew.

Aaron wakes up, for once not retching, and Nicky pushes everything out of his mind to go back to his side.

Hours later, Aaron is still buried in blankets, but he has Nicky’s PC on his legs and is somewhat engrossed in watching *A Bug’s Life*. He’s managed to stomach a plate of boiled rice with a boiled potato and a full cup of tea, so that’s good. The basin stays by the side of the bed, but he hasn’t
thrown up since this morning so that’s more of a precaution.

He whines when the doorbell rings and Nicky has to get up to take it, because that means losing his own personal bed warmer, but he doesn’t fight too much. He probably knows it’s Andrew and he wants his twin back. Nicky heard him call his brother’s name in his sleep a couple times.

Andrew, predictably, storms in with annoyance radiating off him. Jeremy is still blessedly unaffected and thanks Nicky for allowing his kid to sleepover. “We had lots of fun,” he promises, a bright smile on his lips, and Nicky wonders if maybe he has some difficulties picking up social clues because Andrew looks all but amused right now.

But Jeremy has a knowing look to his eyes as he waves at Andrew before hurrying to the stairs and the street, where his aunt is waiting for him in the car.

Andrew doesn’t even wait to check from the window if he reaches the vehicle. Instead, he makes a beeline for the bedroom and by the time Nicky reaches him, he’s already sitting by his twin, close enough to see the screen but enough to slump against each others. They’re holding hands in front of the PC, though, and Nicky sighs away the lecture about catching Aaron’s flu because he knows he won’t be listened to anyway.

A full day with Jeremy seems to have made Andrew reevaluate germs. That’s sad.

As the kids are keeping an eye on each others, he moves to the kitchen instead to get started on some light dinner and call Allison to confirm he won’t be going to work the next day either. She’s not thrilled, but neither she tries to change his mind, and he goes back to the twins with a lighter heart.

“You’re sleeping in my room, tonight,” he warns Andrew. “I’m not risking you catching this too.”

Andrew stares and doesn’t answer. Nicky hates that he knows how this is going to end.

Andrew does not sleep in the other room. Instead, he sleeps against Nicky’s back, as pressed as Aaron is to Nicky’s front, and they all curl up to try and fit in the two single beds. Nicky is in the dip where the two mattresses touch, but he’s tired enough that he falls asleep anyway.

Aaron gets better by Tuesday.

Andrew doesn’t catch the bug, indeed, but Allison finds Nicky curled over in the office bathroom — unisex, so she doesn’t bother with subtlety and just starts banging on his door to be let in — and sends him home with a copy of the new number of the magazine, with Laila and Sara in full front cover, and the promise not to get back until he’s better too.

Roland moves in for a couple of days to take care of both the twins and Nicky, because people still won’t trust him to look after himself for some reason. Renee’s mother, Stephanie, sends cookies through Jean and Abby stops by to check on them all. Matt has a field day laughing at Nicky’s expenses. Whatever.
At least he’s out of the office when Reynolds Senior drops by to demand an explanation for the lesbian photo-shot currently trending on every and all social media.
Nicky vs The Past

Chapter Notes

New rule of thumb for this story: if I haven’t shrunk him, Nicky has banged him.

WARNING: kinky chapter. I can't believe I'm writing this, but there are two sex scenes, not graphic, a masturbation one and a BDSM one which implies D/s undertones and impact play. For any and all questions feel free to contact me on tumblr, okay?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nicky gets himself off biting into his pillow.

He doesn’t want the twins to hear him, gosh, never, that’d be the most embarrassing thing ever, but he’s wound so thigh with horniness and tiredness and loneliness. He’s been thinking about Matt again, though it’s hard for him to go back to that arrangement, for as easy and comforting as it was.

Blankets to his chest, he lets a fantasy in which Erik never left and Matt is open to a threesome play into his brain. It’s greedy, but so what? He hasn’t felt another man’s touch for so long, he deserves something nice.

He imagines Erik kissing his throat and Matt the back of his neck. He imagines pale skins against his own dark one. He’d be in the middle, of course; he’s established that this is a selfish time. Matt would pump his dick as Erik would open his ass, so he’d be wrapped in a tangle of limbs and wide chests. They’d call him hot, and sexy, and beautiful. They’d tell him he’s worthy of this, of them, of both.

Matt would leave an hickey that would disappear in the morning light. Erik would suck on his nipples and bite them until Nicky screams.

Double penetration wouldn’t need too much preparing and wouldn’t hurt a thing. This might be the most unrealistic part of his imagination, but he spills in the cloth he put on his dick nonetheless.

He melts with the next exhale.

Tiredly, he wraps the cloth and throws it on the floor, will be a problem for tomorrow, then rolls on his back to stare at the blackness of his room. The light that comes from his digital clock says he should have been asleep hours ago. Instead he couldn’t, buzzed with nervous energy, until his brain had told him in no uncertain terms that it was about time he got himself an orgasm, one way or another.

Jesus, this is getting pathetic.

He sighs, but his muscles are lax and his thoughts are finally getting sluggish. He closes his eyes and he’s out for the count.
For breakfast, Andrew eats sweet and Aaron eats salty. Nicky grumbles and fixes himself some coffee as he watches them glare at each others’ food. “Just go to school,” he groans.

Both roll their eyes at him. He ignores them.

Sure enough, they’re out of the house and on their way to the bus stop in the next ten minutes, which allows Nicky to change his bedding and throw sheets and the cloth from last night in the washing machine first thing first. Only then, he starts getting ready for work.

“What? No!”

Roland whines, like a puppy on a leash. “Oh, come on, Nicky, please.”

Nicky ignores him. It sounds quite funny when they are on the phone together, and all Nicky would need to do is to hung up to be spared from his friend’s insistence. Instead, he keeps moving around the office, rearranging all the papers Allison threw in the air in a fit of rage ten minutes ago, and sighs. “Roland, I’m at work.”

“So what? You were at work when you met Erik too, and it didn’t stop you from giving him head in a bathroom stall.”

Oh God. “That—it’s not the same thing! And anyway, I can’t do it.”

“Why not?! You’re hot, single and the twins will be out the whole night! Do you know how long it’s been since we went out a night together, uh? Do you? Do you, Nicholas Esteban Ramirez—“

“My name’s not Ramirez!”

“Nicky!”

“Roland.”

“Nicky.”

“Listen, I’m twenty-seven, gay, with two kids, and I work full time as the PA of a multimillionaire white girl in a feud with her parents. Do you want to know how I dream to spend my first night off from both work and parenting? Sleeping.”

“Dude, that’s depressing.”

Nicky sighs and hits the bottom of the pile of documents on his desk to align them. “Welcome to adulthood.”

“Fatherhood, you mean. I’m an adult and I don’t do that shit.”

Nicky hesitates, his fingers caressing the paper slightly. “I’m not the twins’ father.”

“And Gory’s not mine, but I still call him daddy,” Roland retorts, and Nicky makes a face. That is definitely something that he could have done without knowing about his kids’ babysitter. “Nicky, come on, it’s just a night out. We don’t have to do anything, just hang out at Eden’s like old times.
We can drink something, dance lots and if you don’t want to show a good time to any of the thousands of men I know will be throwing themselves at your feet, fine, play hard to get and send them home dry. But, please, let’s go out. I need it bad, man.”

Lots of things can be said about Roland, but not that he is not a supportive friend. “I don’t know—“

“Great! I’ll come over at nine to prepare you! Bye!” He hangs up before Nicky can retort about agreeing or needing help to get ready. He sighs against the cooing of the closed line.

Allison yells for him from her office. He groans, because she’s in a foul mood this morning, and then he shakes his head.

Apparently, he has a date to look forward to, tonight.

“Allison,” Nicky answers, through only slightly clenched teeth, “—but I think you are missing a very important point here.”

Allison arches a perfectly shaped brow and sinks deeper into the chair on the other’s side of Nicky’s desk. He glares at her for a moment as the man on the other end of the line keeps rambling away.

“Allison,” Nicky interrupts again, thoroughly done. “Have you considered that maybe Mrs Reynolds left you her PA number because she’s utterly uninterested in any kind of relationship with you besides that of a business deal?”

More of the offended spluttering. Jesus, why didn’t Allison just give this dude an e-mail address? He’s like a mussel, stuck to his rock and refusing to let go.

Alright, then. Time to use the scalpel. “Sir, this is my office number. Unless you have a work-related issue to discuss, I have to ask you to stop calling. I need this line free for other clients of miss Reynolds. Have a nice day.” He hangs up.

Allison starts slow clapping at him and he throws a balled up piece of paper at her head. “Talking dumb suitors down is not in my contract.”

“Too bad for you, you never put it in your clauses.” Utterly unbothered, she gets up from the chair and fixes her already perfect skirt. “Block his number and get the contact info of his secretary. This bored me already.”

Nicky contemplates asking why she’d given him the number in the first place, then, but instead sighs. “I have the afternoon off, remember.”

She waves him off. “Let him stew until tomorrow then. I don’t really care.“

Of course she doesn’t. Nicky rolls his eyes bemusedly and then shakes his head to her retreating figure. As soon as she’s disappeared on her study, his phone rings again.

He sighs.

“Sir, once again, no, I cannot let you speak with Mrs Reynolds. She’s busy at the moment, and uninterested in general.”
Nicky’s afternoon off is almost a whim he allowed himself. Aaron has a match at four, one Andrew looks annoyed at the mere mention of, and then all the kids are staying over at Jeremy’s place for some kind of party Nicky doesn’t know how to define. It’s practically mathematical that the kids will lose this match too, and that will mean getting kicked out of the season, so it’s probably supposed to be some kind of distraction to lift everybody’s mood on their ever-sunny captain’s part. Kevin and Katelyn are also invited and so is Andrew, who apparently doesn’t mind too much. Nicky suspects it’s because of the promise of food and no more Exy.

He took the afternoon off to have time to bake some cookies for the kids to bring along, and now also to give himself a once over. Roland’s extorted promise of a night out at Eden’s was unexpected and bossy but probably needed, and he won’t be caught dead there in a less than flattering and fabulous attire. He hasn’t been on the dating scene for a while now, but he still has his dignity.

The drive home comes with some kind of jittery vibe, not exactly anxiety but a mixture of excitement and slight nervousness. He really doesn’t need to find out parenthood stripped him of the looks to snatch a one night stand.

Inside, he takes a moment to appease the mess caused by the mere presence of almost-teens in the house. Aaron’s leftover notes from classes are spread everywhere with an order that only he is apart of; and Andrew’s socks always emerge mismatched from the washing machine because he wears them to bed and one or both get lost in the sheets every other time. Their backpacks are on the floor of their room, thrown hurriedly when they stopped home to get Aaron’s training gear and Andrew’s notebook for whatever he does on those pages. There’s a load of laundry — or two, honestly — to sort and wash, the fridge is running low on vegetables and, when Nicky goes to pour himself a drink, someone put the empty carton of the orange juice back in after finishing it. It’s a toss up whether it’s a prissy Aaron’s doing, or a lazy Andrew’s. Damn brats.

Nicky sighs, throws the carton away and writes orange juice on the paper stuck to the fridge with a magnet. He circles it, draws a tiny arrow and adds, This is what you do when you finish something, you heathens!

Aaron is at pre-game with the team, which means talking strategy then bullcrap then game plan again, and Andrew is probably hanging around the bleachers and avoiding Kevin. The match starts in a few hours, so Nicky gets started on the cookies immediately, and in a few minutes he’s deep into kneading and half-dancing to some song from the radio. He can feel his cheeks ache with the constant smile he’s wearing, and that’s nice. It’s a good day.

His phone rings as soon as he’s pushed the tray of cookies into the oven, and he’s not too surprised to see it’s Andrew, to be fair. He answers with, “Do you have a radar for cookies? I just got done preparing them!”

A moment of silence lets him know this isn’t what Andrew called for, but it’s still battling with his previous reason to decide which one is top priority.

“Cinnamon or chocolate chips?” The cookies won.

“Cinnamon.” Nicky puts the phone on speaker on the table as he starts to tidy up what he pulled out. “And they’re not for you. They’re your brother’s team’s consolation cookies.”
“I’ll fail a class, if you’d rather.”

Nicky glares at the device. “Do try it, Andrew. I’ll put you on healthy diet regime. I’ll ask Kevin for recipes and fill you up with kale smoothies until they’re dripping from your ears.” Andrew’s sound from the phone is the same fake retching he does when Aaron announces he’s hanging out with Katelyn. Nicky snorts at the dramatics. He surely knows where the kid got them from in the family. “Do you needed something else, besides knowing what these cookies are made of?”

“I’m hanging out at Jean’s place for a while,” Andrew announces, sounding all but happy about it. “Jeremy’s moms are driving us there.”

“Wait, who’s us?”


“Hey!”

“We’ll be back in time for the game, bye.”

“Wait, Jeremy’s playing tonight, he can’t—” Tut, tut, tut. “—leave the stadium. Jesus Christ.”

This kid is going to be the death of him, if Aaron doesn’t kill them both for kidnapping his team captain two hours before the starting whistle.

Nicky is not overly worried about Andrew fucking off with a three seconds notice and two other kids. Jeremy is a responsible kid, Jean is an introvert and Sara and Laila are careful moms; the most Andrew can get up to is throwing something at Jeremy to try and see if he loses his patience. He’s probably not hiding somewhere to try smoking or stuff like that.

Okay, so maybe Nicky isn’t overly worried, because, no matter what, Andrew would never pass on an opportunity for cinnamon cookies or ice-cream. The kid’s still predictable enough when it comes to his junk food.

Aaron is just as predictable: he’s fuming on the team’s bench and Nicky can see him slamming a ball against the floor to catch its rebound with increasing strength. He’s probably planning his brother’s murder. Nicky weights the tray in his arms and wonders if he shouldn’t have baked more cookies, or splurged on some icing.

He sits down with a sigh and uses the tray to occupy a seat for Andrew when he finally decides to show up.

He knows he will, if nothing else because Jeremy will want to come and play his game and Kevin will pester Jean with texts to come and join him to watch it. Andrew will follow because Renee is not home from college this weekend, so he has no reason to hang out at the Walker’s home.

Speaking of which, why did he even go there? From what Nicky knows, neither Jean nor Jeremy are his to-go-to friends. That’s usually Aaron, or it was Kevin before Thea happened and things got awkward. They’re better now, but Nicky sees how tense Andrew is when she tags along. He hopes it’ll pass.

Time ticks and the stadium fills and Nicky starts to worry Andrew won’t see him among the
crowd. He routinely turns back and stands on his feet to stare at the doors and check if he comes in, but in vain.

Five minutes to the beginning, Jeremy appears to the bench, panting and aiming straight for Dan. Nicky hisses through his teeth at her furious face, but whatever excuse Jeremy spins on her, it turns the frown into a thinking face fast enough. The team huddles in a circle to talk and Nicky looks for Kevin, first row as always, tonight with Thea faithfully by his side. Jean joins them fast enough, which means Andrew has to be somewhere, right? Nicky wouldn’t put it past him to skip any Exy game which wasn’t his brother’s, but this is Aaron’s. He wouldn’t leave him alone to face this.

He pulls out his phone and ponders calling, but ultimately decides against it. First, he wouldn’t hear a thing with the chaos of the stadium, and second, he doesn’t want to sound overbearing. He shoots a simple text, instead: _whr r u? the match is starting!!!!!!_

He’s pretty sure Andrew will answer just to complain about his typing, then he looks back to the court. Aaron is taking his spot with a wide deviation in front of goal to exchange some words with Jack, who’s standing stiff in his spot. From the posture of both of them, neither is being overly friendly.

They’re so going to lose this.

Nicky sighs, checks his phone again and finds his text left on Read. Which, rude, what the fuck? He sends another: _!!! I know u read it!!!!!!!_

It takes less than five seconds: _Read 03.57 pm._

Okay, now Nicky is considering worrying. Andrew is on his phone, which is good, but not typing is too similar to not talking and non-verbal Andrew is a scared and potentially hurt Andrew. Or Nicky is just paranoid, of course, but experience taught him that Murphy’s Law is the only reliable truth of life.

He nibbles on his own lower lip, considering whether to send another text, when finally Andrew responds.

— _Pay attention to the game. I’ll come in during second half._ —

The relief of such an articulate answer dampens the curiosity of why Andrew would skip the first half of Aaron’s match.

Is it because he doesn’t want his friends to see him hanging around with his guardian? Nicky would understand! Andrew doesn’t have to sit with him, of course! Nicky can sit with some of the other parents, he’s pretty sure the twins have no idea that they mostly avoid him, no big deal! But on the other hand, Andrew never complained about their seating arrangement before. Is it because Thea’s here and he wants time before joining her, Kevin and Jean? That doesn’t make sense, sooner or later he’ll have to see her.

Oh god, what if they really tried smoking?! What if he’s outside airing his clothes because they smell of cigarettes?! Nicky tries to remember how old he’d been when he first tried smoking, then he remembers he’s always been too much of a worrywart, certified Good KidTM, to smoke. Damn.

Zachary Williams did smoke, didn’t he? The preacher caught him behind church once, Nicky and the others could hear the scolding from all the way into Bible School class. How old was he? Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen? Nicky finds that he can’t really remember, as most of his memories from the past are foggy since the camp.
The phone in his hands vibrates and Nicky jumps a good foot in the air. Andrew’s text is lapidary and has the full energy of an eye-roll: — Nicky. Stop worrying. —

So, either Andrew’s in the stadium, or he knows his cousin too well.

Nicky sighs. He answers back with an heart and a couple exclamation points and then slips the phone in his pocket. He takes the tray back in his hands to give himself something to do, which is fixing and fixing again the aluminum foil over the cookies.

The whistle blows.

Jeremy is aggressive from the get go. He snaps forward without a glance to their dealer, confident that she’ll catch the ball and send it forward. She does, and Jeremy scores within the first minute of game. Holy shit.

Their side of the bleachers cheers, though Nicky can admit not too excited. It’s not the first time that Dan’s team starts well, and it won’t matter if their defense lets more goals through than their strikers make. It’s a well known development, for this team.

Nicky tightens his grip on the tray and yells louder, to compensate.

He thinks he saw Aaron turn the other way. Is he pretending not to know Nicky?! That’s so rude! Both twins, so rude to him!

As expected, the opposite team gets back at them hard. They outmaneuver Aaron and shoot on Jack.

Who doesn’t even move.

Nicky watches, abashed, as Jack lets the goal in without even trying to save it. Dan yells, furious, and the other back-liner hurries to get in between Aaron and the goal. When Jack picks the ball up again, he throws it so poorly it bounces closer to their adversaries than Jeremy. It gets picked, and someone attempts a shot from mid-court.

Again, Jack lets it in.

Dan calls a time-out and a substitution. Which, yeah, Nicky gets it, letting Jack on goal when he’s throwing a tantrum like this is a suicide, but he fails to see how they can substitute him when the whole reason he’s in goal is that there is no other goalkeeper. Did Dan forget that?

Maybe she’s too pissed to remember. She looks kinda like a wrathful goddess as she pulls her goalie out and pushes someone else in.

Nicky’s brain feels like a roller coaster, because the moment he gets down from the surprise of Jack’s stupidity he reads Minyard #3 on the newcomer’s jersey and has to make a double take. Wasn’t Aaron on court already?, isn’t he #5?, and isn’t he a back-liner?, did Nicky look at the wrong kid the whole season?!

It takes embarrassingly long to click, for him. It takes Aaron stepping forward and smacking his back-liner racquet to the other Minyard’s goalie racquet. It takes the different jersey, but the matching serious look.

Nicky’s brain thinks: Right, there’s two of them…

Nicky’s brain goes: Holy shit.
Nicky’s brain fries: *It’s Andrew!*

The bleachers look confused on both sides. It’s been so long since Andrew ever played that most people don’t even remember him, and the opposite team is trying to figure out the twins thing, probably. Nicky is silently losing the little composure he has and he’s vibrating on his seat.

Andrew hits the butt of his racquet on the floor and everybody on court realizes the game has just begun. The referee calls the time-out over and the ball returns in game.

Aaron lets his striker through without even trying. The other kid looks on goal like a shark and shoots with all the confidence from the past two goals in him.

Andrew doesn’t even change his expression. He shifts his stance, moves and hits the ball back so hard it bounces well past the mid-court line, close enough to Jeremy that he has no trouble catching it and evening the score.

Aaron nods to himself, quietly pleased.

Nicky only realizes he’s yelling and on his feet when he hears the clanging sound of the tray hitting the ground. *Shit, Andrew’s going to kill him if he ruined the cookies.* *Oh, who cares, he blocked it!*

He gives himself a few more minutes to freak out and yell and cheer, before anxiously checking on the sweets. They luckily seem to have mostly survived the impact.

It’s unbelievably such a one-sided game after Andrew gets in goal. Training with Renee kept his muscles and reflexes honed and sharp, and his terrible attitude means he lives to shame Jack. Though his performance clearly drops into the second half of the game, especially in the final quarter, he plays wonderfully, and the back-liners have no troubles covering from him when he starts wavering later on.

The final score is 9-4 in the Foxes favor and Nicky can’t believe it no matter how much he stares at the board. When he looks back down, Aaron took over hugging Andrew in the name of the whole team and Jeremy is leading the others in circling around the twins. Nobody is touching them, and Nicky wonders who told them, then decides he doesn’t care and just starts crying because he’s too happy to bother with the details.

Kevin, in the first row, is positively losing his shit.

Nicky pushes past lots of people to make it to the locker rooms and he couldn’t care less. Someone throws some choice words at his back. Whatever.

The victorious cheers lead him to the team without difficulties. He arrives to find Jean and Thea keeping Kevin from jumping on Andrew for not telling him he was coming back to Exy, Jeremy is smiling angelically up to Dan, who seems in the middle of lecture she herself doesn’t really believe in.
Aaron’s smile is a thousand watt and more. When he sees Nicky, he shoots himself at him, and Nicky snatches him with an arm. “That was freaking awesome!”

“I know!”

Nicky laughs. When he puts Aaron down, he finds Andrew waiting. He opens his arm again, for a hug.

“Ugh, no. I want the cookies.”

“Rude as fuck, both of you!” Nicky cries, but the magic word has filled the locker room and now there’s more eyed trained on him. It feels threatening enough that Nicky relinquishes the tray to Andrew with just a pout. “You could have told me. I dropped them when I saw you out there!”

Aaron snorts. “A bit closer and you would have plastered yourself to the plexiglass like a starfish.”

“I did tell you,” Andrew interjects before Nicky can comment on Aaron’s concept of humor.

“You did not!”

“I did,” and there’s a glint in his eyes, well hidden under fake indifference, that says how exactly Andrew knew that Nicky would have misinterpreted his text and how ready he’s been for this moment for who knows how long. “I texted you that I was coming in during second half. Not my fault Jack decided to be a little shit and got himself subbed out sooner than planned.”

Nicky thinks back to the message and stares. Is this kid for real?!

“Very well, no cookies for you, give me back that tray.”

Is Nicky ashamed to be wrestling a bunch of twelve-years-old for a tray of cookies? Absolutely not. Is he ashamed of losing? Neither.

Turns out Jeremy is the mastermind behind Andrew’s return, and Jean the muscled arm. Jeremy changed the order for the new jerseys adding one more goalie set for a Minyard, and sneaked it away before Dan could notice, because he knew Andrew would have refused on principle if he’d felt like they had taken his agreement for granted. Then, he and Jean had started a campaign of torturing Andrew with requests to play, Jeremy when they were at his place and Jean when he got to come and visit during Aaron’s practice.

Andrew had been much like Jack at first, passively letting the other two have their fun, but then Jeremy had said something about Kevin being right and that’s the point in the story where Nicky sighs because nothing gets Andrew going like proving Kevin wrong.

Andrew says he let Jean sneak in during martial arts practice and help him pick up Exy again because fighting was not fun anymore without Renee. Nicky pretends to believe it. Aaron doesn’t accord him the same courtesy and calls it bullshit, so he gets a cookie shoved roughly in his mouth.

Jeremy laughs innocently the whole night. Nicky kinda fears that kid.

Jean ignores Kevin’s ranting and picks the chocolate chips from his cookies — yes, Nicky made chocolate chips cookies too after Andrew called him, so what?, he has a very soft spot for his twins
— to give them to Andrew, who sticks them roughly on his cinnamon ones.

It’s quite later that Nicky is driving the kids to Jean’s place. Kevin and Thea are riding with them, and Aaron takes one for his brother and claims that one of them has to take shot-gun because they are the oldest. Andrew hip-checks him, though Nicky can’t tell if it’s a gratitude gesture or a mind your business threat.

Thea takes shotgun. Kevin sits between the twins and hounds on Andrew to know for how long he has resumed training, what his running time is, what’s his blocking average. Andrew pushes himself more and more against the door until Aaron grabs Kevin by the neck of his shirt and pulls him back.

When they get to their destination, even Thea looks done with her boyfriend’s questions. “Jeez, Kev, give him a break,” she huffs. “If he stops coming to practice again, you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

It’s like the option of Andrew abandoning Exy again hadn’t even touched Kevin’s brain, before Thea mentioned it. He goes white so fast and he immediately shuts up. Andrew looks relieved.

“Allright,” Nicky announces, trying to ease the tension. “Here we are. Make sure you have all your stuff and be nice with Stephanie, I’m looking at you two, demonic twins.” Aaron rolls his eyes and climbers off, Kevin hurriedly after him. Thea thanks him politely before following. Andrew stays where he is. “Drew?”

“If I resume playing there’s the yearly fee to pay,” he spits out, looking at the window as if he’s expecting something to change in the familiar scenery around them. “And my old gear won’t fit me anymore. Helmet and racquet and shoes. I already asked Renee for her old stuff but she was taller than me at twelve and its all too big on me. She has a friend, though, and she said she’d ask them to see if she can find me something so—“

“Hey,” Nicky turns on the seat for all he can, trying to get face to face to Andrew from where he sits right behind the driver. “Drew, relax. Okay? Don’t worry about these things, that’s my job. I’ll check with Dan what you need and we can go to Exites next week, alright? If I see that it’s a problem, I’ll ask Allison for an advance on my next paycheck. It’s alright, okay?”

Andrew stays sat. “It was a problem when we were both playing, though. Last time. Before.”

He doesn’t say before what. Nicky doesn’t push. “Yeah, well, it was a different situation. Working with Allison pays more than Eden’s and the Wild Fox together, I promise you. We’ll be alright.” He smiles, and it comes really easy to his lips. “I was really happy to see you back there, Drew. You were incredible.”

This time, Andrew reacts. He makes a face. “Don’t go all Kevin on me,” he huffs, and then frowns harder. “I’m out of practice.”

“But you do want to get back? Into practice, I mean. Playing, and all.”

Andrew shrugs. He doesn’t talk, which Nicky knows it’s because he thinks whatever answer could potentially be a lie, as he’s not yet make up his mind.

He outstretches a hand to pat Andrew’s knee. “It’s okay, there’s no hurry.”

“Kevin is in a hurry.”

“Kevin was born in a hurry. He’s rushing himself to an exceptionally wrinkly sixty-five.”
Finally, Andrew smirks. He taps a finger on Nicky’s wrist twice, then he finally gets off the car too. When he joins the others, Nicky blows them a kiss. The twins both answer with a disgusted expression.

Ah. To be loved back, isn’t it nice?

“He was so fucking cool, Ro! Ro, Ro, Ro, you should have seen him!” Nicky is jumping up and down in his seat and slams his glass on the table with a bit too much force, but he doesn’t care. “Ro, are you listening to me?!”

Roland laughs. “Dude, you haven’t been talking about anything but Andrew and Aaron’s awesomeness for the past hour! You’re so hammered already.”

Nicky knows he is not because he didn’t drink enough for that. He’s just a bit loose and very excited. Also, everybody looks hot, but that’s probably because Eden’s is a bit of a pretentious place for pretentious assholes.

“Hey! You said that out loud, Nicky!”

“Let him be, Roland,” Josh smiles, picking his beer up. He’s been going lightly on the alcohol because he knows his friends, but he’s technically on his day off and far too happy to listen to Nicky ramble about the twins. “He does have a point, and you know it.”

Roland huffs. “Well, yes, but he shouldn’t say it! He used to work here!”

Nicky whines. Sometimes he misses Eden’s, bar-tending, being around the guys. It was a lot and it messed up his schedule and it wasn’t good for the kids to have him come and go at such hours, but if the situation had been different? He would have loved to stay.

“Dude.” Is Josh crying? Why is Josh crying?

Roland bends over the table to kiss Nicky’s cheek. “God, please, never change, you adorable shit.”

Nicky laughs, even if he doesn’t really get why.

Roland feeds him some water and he drinks it dutifully until he feels a bit more level-head. Then, they drag him to the dance floor.

Nicky slipped himself into a pair of high-waisted skinny red jeans via acrobatics that he didn’t even know he could do, and he put on a single-sleeved white crop top covered in sequins, mostly because it was one of those things he could never wear anywhere else. It’s not completely Eden’s style, not enough leather and black for that, but it’s still hot enough to grant him entrance. Baking and never exercising means he doesn’t have the defined abs of some people around here, but Roland squeezes his belly and laughs and kisses his cheeks and calls him hot, and Nicky feels good. The heels he wore make him taller than most people around here, which is good, but also hurt so much, holy fuck.

He’s so out of practice, he gives up on the shoes half way through the third song he dances to. He stumbles back to their table, takes them off and shoves them under his chair for safe-keeping. Or not. If someone wants to steal those traps, fine by him. He never wants to see them again.
He returns to the floor barefoot and miraculously nobody steps on him. Roland demands to be lift and twirled and Nicky complies with a laughter, then Josh too. Nicky takes a step back, laughing to tears when Roland’s navel piercing gets stuck in Josh’s lacy shirt, and then bumps into someone.

He turns, apology ready on his lips, when he’s met with the hottest guy he’s— seen in a while. Not the absolute hottest, but hot enough that Nicky would stop and stare for a moment in the local supermarket before remembering he has kids.

Dude has a ponytail of pitchy black hair that falls to the middle of his chest, which is undoubtedly naked, Nicky notices. Is that a colored sleeve tattoo? He thinks it’s a colored sleeve tattoo. He’s also wearing a pair of soft black slacks with the lowest waist hem even known to a man and a sturdy leather belt to match. The way it’s so deliciously worn out tells Nicky that belt saw some wrists and asses. For some reason, the man also wears a watch, a very nice one, and a leather band on the other wrist. The only thing covering his upper body is a leather harness made of straps and buckles, covering practically nothing. Under the stroboscopic lights, Nicky can tell he has almond-shaped dark eyes and thin lips, but not much more.

Nicky’s mouth has already watered and he’s really glad for the tight pants, or he’s pretty sure he’d be making a spectacle out of his miserably neglected crotch. “Oh,” he says, and thankfully doesn’t drool.

Stranger man smiles at him, taller now that Nicky forgo his shoes. “Oh to you, beautiful vision.”

Shit. Nicky knows he’s fucked.

Nicky is well fucked.

The knots in his shoulders, the stress in his back, the worries at the bottom of his head, have all been fucked too. Fucked away, that is.

Stranger’s chest is soft, somehow. He has nice pecs that work as pillow perfectly, and a naturally warm temperature which engulfs Nicky very nicely. Or maybe Nicky just really, really, needed to get laid. Both options are plausible. Potentially both true, too.

Also, Nicky’s ass still stings, but it’s hilarious the more he focuses on it. In the end, he can’t help it and starts giggling out loud.

Stranger stops drawing circles on his back and arm to look down at him. “What?” he asks, smiling still.

He smiled the whole time. Kissing Nicky’s chest and navel, asking him for preferences, checking on him, cleaning him up. Smiling, always smiling. It felt so nice, to be so cared for. And also to be roughened up a bit, because Nicky’s always on the eggshells with the twins and sometimes the rush of endorphins from pain is the best thing ever, as he’s learnt in his years at Eden’s.

Again, Nicky giggles at his own thoughts. He doesn’t know how to explain how ridiculous it is, so he just breathes out, as he can, “I’m raising two kids.”

Stranger raises an eyebrow and slips his hand lower to grab on Nicky’s ass. Nicky inhales a sharp breath. “Let me guess,—” he says, teasingly, “—your opinion on spanking changes drastically depending on whether it’s on kids or on adults?”
Nicky bursts out laughing, and Stranger slips his tongue in.

There’s a digital clock on the bedside table which says six am. It’s early enough for one more round.

Nicky curses his pants as they press on his ass and Stranger laughs of his misery. “Your sadism shows now more than ever.”

It’s not really true. As he got ready, Stranger made them both eggs and bacon for breakfast to eat the counter of the kitchen, which is a nice care since Nicky doubts he’d like to sit anywhere right now.

The apartment is clean and has big windows that let lots of light through. It’s refined, like the furniture and the carpets and the pictures hung around of places and people and a big red Shiba dog. Nicky coos at the latter.

“Technically my ex-wife’s,” Stranger offers. “But, between the two of us, he likes me better. She too, since we divorced.”

It’s nice, honestly. As nice as it was with Matt, except with the added kink on the side which means probably a bit better.

_Still._

Stranger laughs at whatever expression Nicky is making. “Relax,” he says. “Two kids, I got the hint. And I travel too much for work for any form of _steady_. Can we call this a satisfying one night stand and maybe exchange numbers in case we feel like repeating the experience next time I’m in town?”

“Very satisfying, indeed,” Nicky agrees, and swallows some more eggs. “I don’t know about repeating, but, sure, why not. Do I find your number tattooed on my ass?”

Stranger bends over to kiss him again. “Don’t test me.”

Too bad Nicky likes how it sounds.

They exchange numbers when Nicky is already on the door. The man types his digits and Nicky is even surprised to see he doesn’t write _Stranger_ in the name box.

“_Ichirou_,” he reads out loud, testing, and smiling proudly when he gets a nod for correct pronunciation. “Japanese?”

Ichirou nods. “Born and raised until I decided my family was crazy and I left to come here.”

Nicky kisses him on the lips, because he knows something of dysfunctional families. “The fortune of all gay men in the area,” he jokes, and Ichirou smacks him lightly on the ass and laughs.

As he leaves in last night clothes, Nicky thinks that this is his first Walk of Shame since years. He
almost finds it hard to believe.

He takes the bus to Eden’s because he left his car there, and he didn’t want to keep Ichirou from his work. During the trip, he checks his phone and finds a few impressed text and Roland’s outrage at being abandoned at the club, which is as fake as they come because it ends with, *figures that the only night you get out you end up taking home the hottest dude around.*

*Hottest.* Nicky almost thought the same last night, but stopped at the last minute, unable to deny that his brain had for a moment conjured shorter blond hair and almost scandinavian traits, the rougher German accent compared to Ichirou’s wet Japanese, soft cuddles instead of hard leather. Both have their merits, but he knows which one he’d pick, every single time.

He’s at the stop before his that his brain stops working and his hands go on their own. He opens FB, types the familiar name in the search bar and scrolls down the results. It’s one of the first, just as they take the last turn before Eden’s alley.

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Nicky doesn’t let himself think too much. He clicks on *Send a friends request* and exits the fuck out of the app, just in time to launch himself out of the opened doors of the bus.

If he sits in his car to slam his head against the steering wheel for a while, that’s only for him to know.

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Chapter End Notes

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Andrew vs Fatherhood and Aaron vs Dating

Chapter Summary

It was about time this happened.

Warning: References to Tilda and child abuse, be careful.

“Andrew, no,” are the first two words Nicky hears and he doesn’t like them one bit, because he can recognize them as Aaron’s.

He just turned the corner of the gym building. Practice has been over since fifteen minutes, but when he asked Dan about the twins she told him they’d changed out of their clothes fast as a flashlight and gone out with Jeremy. Which currently worries Nicky quite some since, apparently, Jeremy is a manipulative little demon in disguise.

He has yet to get over the fact that this little cherub made his cousin return to Exy, okay? Give him a break.

It’s Wednesday, he’s had a surprisingly quiet day at the office and he’d been planning on taking the kids out, maybe to the cinema, for the night. And since he’s learnt that disgraces always strike when he’s got his back turned, seeing his twins huddled with Jeremy behind a bench kinda makes his skin itch.

“What’s going on here?” Aaron jumps to his feet and very much at attention. Nicky almost expects him to lift a hand to salute. Jeremy’s jump is only slightly lower and immediately covered up with that deviously sweet smile of his. Oh boy, they’re up to something. “Great,” he sighs. “What is it?”

Andrew, who hasn’t bothered to acknowledge his presence, now looks up at him with wide eyes and lips slightly parted. Nicky blinks.

When he looks down, he spots a cardboard box that looks straight out of a dumpster. There’s a stain of something wet to a corner, but the highest flips are open and Andrew is crouched right beside it, a hand inside.

“Nothing!” Aaron says, too late to be believable and apparently too loud because Andrew yelps and then hisses, retreating his hand fast.

“Shut up, Aaron, you’re scaring them,” he all but growls, and Nicky closes his eyes and counts to ten.

“Please, tell me there’s not something alive in there.” He knows there is. He’s just deluding himself, but he’s pretty sure God’s got some debt toward him so maybe, for once, He could make Nicky’s life easier and just listen.

Andrew puts his hand back into the box. There’s some red on the back of it, not blood though, but he doesn’t seem to care. “Jeremy found them this morning, someone left them here.”
Nicky gets closer to the bench and puts a knee on it to lean forward enough to take a peek. These are, objectively speaking, the ugliest things he’s ever seen. He’s not even sure they are cats, they might very well be raccoons. Oh, please, let them not be raccoons, what if they had the rabies?! They’re both also pretty small and silent, but they move a bit. They slowly inch back toward Andrew’s hand, rubbing against it probably to get some warmth. This really isn’t the season for some kits to be on their own outside, indeed.

No, Nicky, no. Don’t do this.

Someone pulls at his sleeve, and Nicky makes the mistake of meeting Andrew’s eyes. “They’re going to die out here,” he says, no nonsense.

Nicky can’t help but notice it’s not a request. “Drew, I don’t even know if pets are allowed in our condo.”

“Just until they get better, then!” Aaron pipes in, grabbing Nicky’s other sleeve. “Jeremy’s mama is allergic to cats, he can’t take them. We can just keep them until we find someone to take them? Just a few days!”

“I think they need food,” Jeremy adds, flippantly and not looking at Nicky directly. “They feel really skinny at the touch. I think they might be underfed. They don’t even have their eyes open.”

There’s two of them, both dirty as heck. Nicky is quite sure one is orange under all the filth; the other is either gray and dusty, or white and very dusty. With the silence, they bump their noses against Andrew’s fingers to prompt them to open and let them closer to the heat source.

Shit, fuck, shit, dammit, fucking fuckity fuck.

“Let’s get them to a vet and see what they say first, okay?”

“Yes!”

“I’m not saying we’re keeping them, Andrew!”

“We’re so keeping them, aren’t we?”

The nurse at the vet clinic giggles a bit, but sends him a sympathetic look. In the other room, Andrew has both kittens in his lap, wrapped in a soft blanket and with only their muzzles peeking to enjoy all the rubs from Aaron’s and Jeremy’s careful fingers. Apparently, neither kitten has any health issue, most of the ugliness was due to the dirty and they should even improve with age, but they’re so little they’ll need to take milk from a feeding bottle for a while. It’s too early for vaccinations and the likes, so they can just take them home and pray that their health hasn’t deteriorated too much when they were on their own.

“I mean, you could leave them here,” she offers. “The local shelter would take care of them until they’re big enough to be put up for adoption.”

Honestly, Nicky wasn’t very sold on the idea of taking the kittens from the twins already, but the words manage to hit him hard and he smiles at her. “That’s nice, but I don’t think they’ll forgive me if I do. We’ll be back often, though, I guess.”
She laughs and gives him a list of things he’ll need for the kittens before waving them bye with a gentle smile.

“Careful with them,” Nicky says, but it’s a useless warning. Andrew carries the kitten like they’re his whole life. Aaron looks a bit more hesitant, but not less concerned.

“How did it go?” Sara asks when they get close enough. She has a kleenex to her nose and takes a careful distance from the kittens, but she looks at them with badly conceived softness.

Nicky shrugs. “Guess I’m a cat dad, now.”

“No, I am!” Andrew huffs. Aaron doesn’t join his brother’s outcry, and Nicky rolls his eyes.

“Well, that’s good to know,” Sara nods, sending him a knowing look. “Guess we can go home now, can’t we?”

Jeremy puts up an heartfelt protest. Very dramatic. Nicky’s pretty sure he saw some tears, at a certain point. Still, Alvarez stays unmoved and the two of them end up leaving. Nicky is once again terrified of this woman’s strength.

“You would have conceded,” Aaron informs him, nonchalantly. Nicky pushes them toward the car.

The kittens are painfully tiny and attached to Andrew. They hold onto his chest with what little strength they have and Andrew adduces fear of injuring them as an excuse to hold them for the whole ride and a good two more hours when they get at home.

“You don’t like them much?” Nicky asks Aaron, anxiously, as they sit at the end of the kids’ beds and watch Andrew feed them with the bottle, but the twin shrugs.

“I prefer dogs, but I don’t hate them,” he says. “I think they prefer Andrew though. It’s fine, I’m just happy because I knows he’ll take care of them.”

Nicky nods, and hugs him by the shoulder to pull him into his side. Aaron snuggles there and promptly falls asleep in a few minutes. It’s hard not to notice how, despite what he said, he looks pretty similar to a cat himself.
Andrew finishes in a few more minutes and finally puts the kittens down in the laundry chest they have currently stuffed with blankets and turned into a cat bed. He scratches them gently with a finger, still. “Do you think they’ll make it?”

Nicky doesn’t really know. These kittens are pretty small and underfed and scared.

Nicky also thinks of his father refusing the twins, setting them up for adoption. He thinks of the first time he saw them, small and underfed and scared. If the cats die, he’s not sure how he himself could react.

He doesn’t know if Andrew and Aaron picked up on the similarities or if they’re just normal kids who just found a pet to dote on. Still, he smiles and maybe holds Aaron a bit tighter to himself. He says, “I’m sure they’re tougher than they look.”

Andrew nods and adds nothing.

They order Chinese for the night, because none of them wants to get up from the bed to go and cook dinner. Later on, Nicky arms himself with all the hypocrisy he owns and adjusts Andrew’s grip on the feeding bottle as he teaches him how to feed the cat. Drew all but spreads himself against his chest and tends to the kittens with almost veneration. Aaron holds the kitten which is not eating and at a point lays a soft kiss to their forehead.

Nicky smiles.

**Eden’s Ichirou:** I might return to town this week for work. May I get to invite you out again? On me, of course.

**You:** dunno… kids got me to let them keep kittens, we’re in a bit of a mess…

**Eden’s Ichirou:** Cats are beautiful but prideful animals, you’ll need to earn their respect. I’ll send you the dates I’m available and you can tell me later on if you’re free. Have a nice day, Nicholas.

**You:** sure!!! you too!!!!!

The kittens are too little to mewl so Nicky fixes himself an alarm around three to go and check on them. Andrew tried to insist on having them in their room, but Nicky knew that the twins would be spending the night awake that way, so he’d compromised with a cat bed in the bathroom, the smaller room and with the least hiding spots, just in case.

Sure enough, they kittens are awake and moving faintly, so he warms some more milk up and feeds them. One of them pooped, so he sighs and cleans that up.

“You better not stop fighting now, you hear me?” he mutters, low barely a whisper, to the orange kitten in his hand as they finally starts sucking after a couple failed attempts. “I’m not telling the twins you didn’t make it.”

The grey one tries to bite his thumb when Nicky puts them back down with their sibling. It doesn’t
hurt a thing, but the combative spirit makes Nicky smile a bit.

“If I’d known that’s what it took to make you get out of bed without a fuss in the morning, I would have gotten you a pet a long time ago,” Nicky comments when the alarm in the twins room goes off at seven and both kids sprint out and to the bathroom in less than five seconds.

Andrew doesn’t dare him of an answer. Instead, he examines both kitten as if looking for an injury and then the chest and blanket. “There’s a piss stain here,” he points out, and Nicky sighs because he has no idea of how to take the smell out. He guesses the blanket is the kittens’ property, now. “Do they need to be fed again?”

Nicky shrugs. “Get changed, eat breakfast and then you can try and see if they take some more bottle.”

After the first fight ever over bathroom precedence, Nicky is ready to call it quits with the day. Instead, he waits for the twins to feed themselves and move on to feeding the beasts before he locks himself in his room and calls Allison.

“Hypothetically speaking, would you kill and-slash-or fire me if I brought kittens to my workplace?”

“Hemmick, what the actual fuck.”

“It’s a long story.”

“Isn’t it always, with you?”

“You’re telling me.”

“I’m justing saying, they’re ugly as fuck.”

“They’re not ugly!” Nicky defends the newly named Mr Poopyman — responsible of Aaron’s screeches of disgust and the consumption of their last bottle of hand-wash — and Suicidal Dickhead — who tried to jump off the edge of the chest just as Andrew was taking it to the living room. “They’re…not snuggly.”

“Oh, you mean like your kids.”

“Allison!”

She arched her brow at him. The gesture looked even more condescending when she stood on her seven inches heels, arms crossed, over his crouched form as he fed the kittens. Never mind that this is his lunch break. “What? You were blatantly thinking the same.”

Nicky doesn’t reply. It’s not that the twins were ugly kids or anything, and he wouldn’t have cared if they were. It’s just that dusty kittens abandoned in a cartoon box at the side of the streets and bruised children waiting in silence by their mother’s rotting corpse have too many potential parallels for Nicky’s simpleton brain.
“I don’t mind the cats,” Allison sighs. “And if you needed, I wouldn’t even mind the kids.”

“You hate children.”

“I hate screaming bags of poop and snot and germs. Twelve years old can wipe their own asses, so they’re fine by me.”

Nicky shakes his head and lowers Mr Poopyman back down in the chest, hidden from sight under his work desk. “Your generosity is astonishing.”

“Just saying, Hemmick,” she shrugged. “I can’t let you off work for the whole time of your kids’ winter break, so if you ever need you can take them here.”

Nicky pushes the chest back under the desk and pulls the towel above it to give the kittens some darkness to sleep and hide. Then, he pulls out and looks back to Allison. She snorts over his thank you.

“Don’t be an asshole,” he tries, but she waves him away.

“You won’t be as happy when you’ll have those two to look after as you juggle all my calls at the same time.”

Nicky sticks his tongue at her back as she walks away like she’s on the red carpet.

Mr Poopyman poops. Nicky groans.

He texts the twins where he parked the car when he goes to get them from school and to be careful when they open the door because he has the kittens with him and they’d get scared. He should have expected the hoard of Exy players and cheerleaders that surrounds his car, really.

Jean looks positively smitten by the kittens, whereas Kevin looks terrified for some unfathomable reason. Katelyn blows a raspberry to him but keeps her hand dutifully behind her back when it’s clear that Andrew, with the box safely held in his arms, doesn’t seem at ease with many people touching the pets. Aaron glowers at Jeremy’s blinding smile.

“Why did you have them?” Andrew asks, frowning as he scratches Dickhead, when they finally get to leave the parking lot.

Nicky rolls his eyes at him in the back mirror from the driving seat. “They’re too little to be left alone for a full day, ‘Drew,” he points out. “I brought them along to work and fed them a couple times. They’re probably due some more milk tonight, by the way. And a bath. I swear one of them has a huge farting problem.”

Andrew and Aaron share a wide-eyed look, before Aaron’s head pops from in between the front seats. Nicky chides him to get his seatbelt on. “Was it a problem?”

“Nah, Allison was alright with them and they’re not big enough to run and hide away, so it was fine.”

“I thought you didn’t like them,” Andrew offers and Nicky sends him a disbelieving look.

“What? I never said that!”
“You didn’t want to keep them.”

“It’s not that I don’t like them, it’s that they are a responsibility and need to be taken care of, especially now that they are little.” Andrew glares at him and Nicky rolls his eyes. “It’s true! And even if I may not have been enthusiastic of taking them, it doesn’t mean I’m going to leave them alone at home to starve! Come on, give me some faith.”

Andrew hums something and goes back to scratching the kittens. There might have been some kind of thank you in one of his breaths, but Nicky doesn’t push it. Aaron dutifully sits back and puts his seatbelt on.

They get home less than five minutes later and the twins hurry up to their room. Nicky hears the word homework but is pretty sure the kids will be all over the kittens for the next hours before they finally do their work. He sighs. This was really not unexpected, honestly.

From the kitchen, he yells, “we’re renaming them, by the way! I can’t bring them to the office if I’m going to call them Mr Poopyman or Dickhead!”

He hears the outcries from the bedroom and promptly ignores them to get started on dinner.

Ichirou texts him thirteen minutes later with a schedule. It has two open nights in a row, an afternoon, a morning, other three nights. It’s captioned, Pick your poison, if you’re up for it.

He’s not going to admit it stirs something in his pants; just leaves it on read.

It’s almost half past ten and he’s in his bed trying to talk himself out of calling Roland on night babysitting duty to go out with Ichirou again. It’s not that he doesn’t have the money, and he’s pretty sure Roland would do it for free if he knew it was for the sake of Nicky’s sexual life, but he feels guilty, like he’s skirting on his guardian duties, like he’s failing the twins by doing so. It’s not the first time he’s had this train of thoughts, he knows it’s not completely healthy, and he’s been promising to himself to talk about it with Abby. But as of now, he tosses and turns and fights the bad feeling in his chest.

It’s not surprising that he gets a nightmare, honestly. It’s very confused and it features his parents inviting him and the twins home for Thanksgiving — and isn’t that a trip in and of itself —, except the table is set for seven and Drake and Tilda show up too. Ichirou comes knocking at the door and Nicky goes to get the door, leaving the twins alone with all the monsters.

He wakes up screaming.

Panting, hands shaking, he folds on himself to bury his face in his palms. He didn’t need this, didn’t need it at all.

“Nicky?” He almost jumps a good foot above the bed. His head snaps back and he meets Aaron’s worried face as the kid stays on the door, half in and half out, still in his pajamas and with ruffled hair. “Are you okay?”

Not really, buddy. “Yeah, sorry,” he coaches his voice to a lower timber, a slower cadence. He gulps down to quell his dried throat. “Sorry. Just a bad dream.”

Aaron nods. Nicky remembers the first time this happened, and how surprised the twins had
looked at finding out that he too had some shadows under his bed trying to claw at him and drag him under. Now, he takes a couple steps in instead, and Nicky brushes hair out of his face to try and compose himself.

“What about you, buddy?” he asks, when Aaron just stands there, looking at the lump of Nicky’s feet under the covers but not at his eyes. “Are you okay?”

Aaron bits his lip, then shrugs. “Did it happen the same way, with us?”

Nicky frowns. “What do you mean?”

Still, Aaron won’t look at him. He looks lower still, to his own bare feet on the dark floor. “When you adopted us,” he says, cold. “Did it go like with the kittens? You didn’t really want us at first but nobody else was going to take us and you took pity on us and adopted us instead?” Nicky freezes. The package of issues that hits him from that sentence is enough to make his mouth drop open and silence him for just a second too long, just enough for Aaron to shake himself. “It’s okay, if it’s like that,” he says, too hurriedly. “It’s okay, I’m really, really happy that you took us regardless. And I understand if you didn’t want us at first because we made it all so difficult for you and, I mean, not even our mom wanted us, so why would you—“

“Aaron.”

Nicky stands up from the bed. He sees the way Aaron flinches, just lightly, and he dies a bit inside because it had been years since any of the twins had been scared of him. Careful, he gets to the end of the bed and offer an open arm.

Aaron is not Andrew. He flings himself in like he’s scared the offer will be rescinded if he takes too long considering.

Nicky doesn’t mind. Nicky just pulls him as tight as possible and sits on the edge of the mattress to pull the kid on his lap.

“Stop this bullcrap right now,” he hushes, unable to hold his own feelings from cracking his voice. “I love you. I love you and I love your brother and I started loving you the moment I laid my eyes on you.” He thinks of his parents, of off-handed mentions of maybe, perhaps, taking the twins later on, when they’d be older. “And even if someone else wanted to have you, I would have fought them to get you myself.”

Aaron has left all pretenses of toughness. He wraps his arms around Nicky’s chest instead, and shakes with sobs that wet Nicky’s shoulder. “Then why did mom hate us?” he asks, voice so much smaller than the fake toughness he uses when he’s trying to hide the acutes of puberty. “What did we do, Nicky? I’m sorry. Whatever it was, I’m sorry.”

Nicky closes his eyes. “Buddy, I have no idea why your mom treated you the way she did, but I can promise you, a hundred percent sure, that it was not your fault. You have nothing to apologize for.”

“Nicky, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I miss her.”

There’s nothing Nicky can really say to that. He’s sorry too. He wishes he could wipe Aaron’s need for his mother’s love completely, just so that he wouldn’t hurt because he never got it and never will. Instead, he kisses his head and lets empty words fall from his lips, anything to calm his kid down. “Come here, buddy. Here. It’s going to be okay, you’ll see.”

It’s an eternity later, minutes of tears, that Nicky notices Andrew is on the door and staring at them. He gestures him in, but Andrew shakes his head. He leaves without a word, not even to his
twin.

Aaron hasn’t noticed, so Nicky doesn’t mention it. They keep cuddling until Aaron falls asleep out of sheer exhaustion, and then Nicky just moves him under the covers of his bed. He doesn’t carry him to the boys room, but he goes there on his own once he’s sure that Aaron’s deep in slumber and well covered.

Andrew is not in the bedroom. A blade of light from under the door says he’s in the bathroom and Nicky knocks and waits for permission before joining him in.

Unsurprisingly, Andrew has the kittens in his lap and is feeding the orange one.

“I’m not going to cry for her. She doesn’t deserve it,” he says, as if Nicky would ever ask that of him.

“I wasn’t expecting you to. It’s okay if you’re mad at her, it’s okay if you hate her,” he replies, yet he crosses his arms and sighs. “But your brother doesn’t have to share all your feelings, and he’s allowed to miss his mom.”

“She wasn’t even a good mom!” Andrew replies, annoyed. "She hit us more than she fed us! Why does he care??”

Nicky looks at the gentle grip of Andrew’s fingers on the kittens and shrugs. “I think he misses what a good mom could have been, rather than Tilda per se. You can’t blame him for that. It’s normal.”

“But she wasn’t a good mom!”

The kittens wriggle at Andrew’s yell. Nicky keeps still, ears open, but luckily Aaron doesn’t call for him. It wasn’t loud enough to wake him up, probably, but his heart misses a bit nonetheless.

When he finally speaks up, Andrew is not looking at him anymore. “Aaron knows she wasn’t, ‘Drew. You need to give him a break on this. You made peace with what your mother did to you in your way; he’ll have to do it in his. If he feels sad for her, you need to respect it.”

This is not the kind of talk he wanted to have in the middle of the night, in the bathroom, while still uneasy from his own issues. But Nicky has learnt that the twins will tackle the heaviest topics when he least expects it and he’s not going to fail them by pulling back from any of them.

Andrew doesn’t answer for a while. He pours some milk on his wrist to make sure it’s still warm. “He forgot some about it. Because it was so long ago and he’s so happy here and his brain erased it, but I didn’t. I forgot nothing.” He puts the feeding bottle down. "I hate that he got to forget, and I didn’t.”

Nicky guessed as much. He and Betsy had a long talk about the downsides of Andrew’s eidetic memory and what it would mean to him in the long run. He says, honest to the marrow, “I hate it too. I wish you both could forget everything.”

Andrew doesn’t acknowledge that. He looks back down to the kittens in his lap. Mr Poopyman is trembling slightly from the early screams, so Andrew caresses to top of their head and mutters a reassurance. He doesn’t look at Nicky when he says, “She almost drowned him in the tub once because she got mad that we splashed the floor while bathing. She only let him go because I broke a wine bottle in the kitchen and she came to beat me up for it. I don’t know if he remembers that.”

It’s absolute zero degrees in the room. Nicky doesn’t answer. He’s not sure he has the words for it.
He turns, leaves the bathroom just long enough to go to the living room and kick the couch as hard as he can. Once, then twice for good measure. He hurts himself more than he moves the thing, but he feels better afterward.

Tilda almost killed Aaron. Tilda almost killed Aaron, Tilda almost killed Aaron. Tilda, that goddamn piece of crap, almost killed her son.

He takes a deep breath before going back to the bathroom. Andrew is looking up at him when he gets in. “You hate her too?”

Nicky thinks of the mess in his chest right now. Thinks that if she were alive now, he would kill her with his own hands. “You have no idea of how much, Andrew. And I hope you never do.”

Andrew elaborates for a moment, then nods. He goes back to feed the kitten, which is now Dickhead. Nicky sighs.

“We’re still renaming them,” he says, trying to find a new, more stable, standing for his feet.

“Their names are fine!”

“Not for polite company, Drew. Rename them.”

When he goes back to his room, he still doesn’t move Aaron. He lays by his side and spends the whole night awake just watching his chest to make sure it rises and falls and never stops.

He goes to The Wild Fox to get Allison’s mid-morning coffee. Matt is wearing a pink pastel turtleneck and kisses both his cheeks and his mouth when he sees him. Robin, the new waitress, has had Renee dye her hair a soft purple now and beams when Nicky compliments it. Wymack sees right through his façade and all but drags him to the back to spill the beans.

Nicky would lie if he were to say he wasn’t hoping he did.

He cusses up a storm when Nicky tells him of Tilda. Shakes his head, fixes his hair, paces around. In the end, he picks a box and stocks in pastries and salty snacks. “Those kids are sturdy as fuck,” he mutters. “Get them something soft, Hemmick.”

Nicky nods and takes the box. He’s not really in the mindset to insist on paying when Wymack hushes him twice against it. Instead, he says, “I was asked out.”

Wymack arches a brow. “What, do I look like a love counsellor? Talk that shit with Boyd.”

“I don’t want to leave the twins for a date,” he insists. “It’s unfair to them.”

This time, Wymack sighs. He scratches the back of his head. “Hemmick, I still take Abby out on dates. We get a babysitter and go. You can’t devote every second to your kids, it’ll wear you out completely. Take a night for yourself; they won’t suddenly elect you Worst Parent ever for it.”

Nicky hums. He can’t say he’s convinced.
The release date of Allison’s magazine coming in three days means Nicky has to stay at the office later than usual and Roland gets to pick the kids up and pretend he hasn’t seen them in years. And to spam Nicky’s phone with pictures of Andrew feeding the kittens and Aaron making both their homework. Which Nicky pretends not to see and deletes from his phone, not without hitting Roland with a complaining text.

By the time he gets home, Roland is late for something, and Nicky meets him halfway up the stairs, says *hi* hurriedly and then loses sight of him. *Oh, well.*

He enters his flat a very tired man. He lets his coat on the hanger and trudges to the twins’ room when he notices that there’s no traces of them anywhere in the living room or kitchen. He just wants to let them know he’s home, honestly.

Therefore, everything Nicky was expecting *but* Andrew and Aaron looking at a poster of a couple kissing. It takes his brain a moment to comprehend that it's one of those things out of magazines and not some porn thing.

The twins wear matching disgusted expressions. Aaron even makes a puking sound. “That’s—ugh. Are you sure that’s how it’s done?”

“How would I know? I’ve never kissed anyone!” Andrew makes a gurgling sound, like he is seriously considering spitting somewhere on the floor. “Why would you ask me?!”

Nicky shakes his head. He wonders if somewhere along the line he’ll have to confront the fact that the twins couldn’t be bothered by his presence as if they were just used to it, but for now he has more pressing issues to consider. First of all, he can guess what is going on, now, by the twins’ words, and he almost sighs in relief.

Okay, scratch that, he *does* sigh in relief.

Finally, Aaron turns to him and frowns. “Is kissing supposed to look this viscid?”

*Oh, well, you might as well do this now, right? What even is your life if not a joke after the other, after all? “Honestly? Yes.”*

“That’s disgusting.”

“You’re twelve, of course it is!” Nicky shakes his head. "Where did you even find that? And why are you asking your brother, he's as old as you!”

“Who should I ask? *Kevin*?” Aaron rolls his eyes. “I’m pretty sure he only kisses Thea after they win a match. And he’s always got this constipated face on…”

“Whatever,” Andrew rolls his eyes. From sitting crossed-legged in front of his brother, he gets up from the bed and fishes for his thickest anti-slippery socks on the floor to put on. “I’m going back to the cats. If you need practice, I saw a movie in which they practiced on a banana.”

“*Nobody* is practicing on *anything*, alright! Practice time is over!”

Andrew slips past Nicky with a smirk that says he’s perfectly aware of what he just suggested his brother. Nicky freaks out a bit because, really? At twelve? He already has to worry about this stuff?!

Aaron groans and lets himself fall backward. The bed is not so wide that it can fit all his dramatics, so his head ends up dangling off the edge. Nicky briefly considers acting on his own cowardice
and leave, but he ends up sighing.

Honestly, fuck parental duties, okay?

When he goes to sit on the edge of the bed, he does so with a second, long drawn sigh. “So…” How does one go to tactfully tackle this kind of things? “Why were you practicing kissing?” Probably not like that. Whatever.

Aaron shrugs, but his pale skin goes bright red and Nicky can’t help but smile at the sight. That, of course, earns him a glare, but in the end his cousin huffs, “Katelyn asked me out. Like, on a date.”

There’s brain cells, in Nicky’s skull, who are dancing a celebratory Macarena right now. “That’s nice, buddy!” he says, but Aaron doesn’t seem as enthusiastic. “Why aren’t you, like, jumping off the walls in happiness? I thought you liked Katelyn.”

“I do! I just.” Aaron groans, but pulls himself up to sit and drags his butt closer so he can speak to Nicky in hushed tones. “I don’t wanna ruin it all. And kissing is supposed to be, like, a big thing, right?”

Nicky hums. “Well, yeah, but… You know you don’t necessarily have to kiss on first date, right?”

Aaron blinks. “You don’t?”

“Of course not,” Nicky smiles, even though his mind is conjuring pictures of how all his first dates somehow ended up sexual, one way or another. “It’s supposed to be a chance to get to know each others.”

“But I already know Katelyn,” Aaron points out, voice quite a bit too prig so Nicky rolls his eyes at him.

“Yeah, but not as a girlfriend. Some people work wonderfully as friends, but not half as well as… partners.” Jesus Christ, Nicky, you can say lovers, can’t you? “It happens.”

“And what would I do if Kat and I don’t work as well as partners?” Aaron frowns.

“You could, I don’t know, find someone else?”

This time, Aaron’s expression turns blatantly disgusted. “I don’t want another girlfriend! I like Kat.”

Nicky’s cousins are the cutest shit Nicky ever got to witness. “Well, that depends on whether she wants you as well.” Then, he tilts his head to a side, contemplative. “You really…never considered anyone else? You see yourself getting old with Kat and just Kat?”

Aaron glares at him with righteous affront. “Why would I want someone else? Kat is perfect.”

Nicky chuckles, but there’s some real warmth in his chest. He ruffles Aaron’s hair and kisses his forehead. “Then I’m sure it will go great, whether you kiss or not.” When he pulls back, Aaron’s smiling, a soft little thing that makes Nicky want to hug the life out of him, dammit. To stop the mushiness from happening, he pulls himself to a stand and declares, “Now, what kind of movies do you and your brother watch when I’m not home?!”

He’s not going to forget about the banana accident anytime soon.

“Oh, you know…” Aaron turns to get his legs off the bed with faux nonchalance. “Porn and the
“Guess what? I’m cleaning your room right the fuck now. Where’s the porn? I’m throwing it out!”
Nicky makes the gesture of lifting the kids’ backpacks and checking under the bed and Aaron
laughs and grabs onto his waist to stop him. “Andrew! Get your ass here! I want to know where’s
your porn!”

From the bathroom, comes a muffled “What the fuck?!” in answer, but Nicky’s grabbing Aaron
and hosting him up on his shoulder and the sounds of their bickering covers whatever other
profanity Andrew might be spouting.

When you spend days agonizing over some troubles of yours and then end up hypocritically
pulling advices out of your ass for your little cousin, whom you happened to adopt at some point in
time, you learn to take your victories and not berate yourself. Also, overthinking is a bitch.

So Nicky calls Roland and asks, in a single breath, if he’s free in any of the slots of the plan he just
sent him.

“Uh, well, I can tonight if you want. Why?” Roland asks, just as the elevator doors open to land
Nicky on his office.

“Hot guy from the club is back in town and these are the times he’s free for a nice, no-strings-
attached fuck before he leaves again. Could you perhaps, please, please, please, watch the twins
for me tonight? And potentially get them to school tomorrow if I’m late, but I’ll try my best to be
there soon enough to pretend I didn’t spend the night out!”

Allison is sitting on Nicky’s chair. She arches a brow, blatantly eavesdropping, but he long since
stopped caring. She once left the speakerphone open on her end so she could listen in on his
conversations, so.

He sticks his tongue out at her as Roland cheers to some kind of deity in his ear. “Dude, that’s so
fucking great! Of course I can! Go and get some, man! Also, I’ll be waiting for my: thank you,
Roland, where would I be without you?”

“Allison shows him the middle finger and walks to her office. She left a list of calls for him to make
on his desk and he groans when he recognizes at least three from cheesy notes on even cheesier
flower bouquets from the past month.

“This Mrs Reynolds would like to discuss the advertisement of your product in her magazine. Your
tokens of love for her? In the trash, of course.” What a great way to spend the day.
Ichirou comes to pick Nicky up from work, which would have been embarrassing if Nicky had given Allison the chance to storm out of her office and stop him from leaving. As he’d already been in the elevator by the time she realized, he was spared the noisy questions.

Ichirou came with a limousine. Jesus Christ.

“Careful,” Nicky says, sliding down the seat to make room for the other man. “Someone might think you’re here for something serious.”

Ichirou’s hair are once again tied in a low ponytail, though this time there’s a silk ribbon wrapped to hold it for the length of a palm. He’s wearing a black suit which is making Nicky think of things. Oh, and he’s smiling the same way he did at the club.

“Allison Reynolds does not take lightly to people trying to steal her toys,” he says, though his hand raises, runs up Nicky’s hard and over his neck to bury into his hair. “Should I be worried of her repercussions even for an occasional agreement?”

He asks, but his fist clenches and Nicky’s head is pulled backward slightly, which is enough to fry whatever neuron could have still been at work there. Which is why he says, “I clocked out,” and moans when Ichirou pulls him into a kiss.

The driver raises the black screen to the backseats.

Nicky is still not sure he’s allowed this. The friends and the sex and the twins’ smiles and teasing. It feels like too much, at times. Like the other shoe has yet to drop and he’s just waiting for that. Sometimes he has nightmares and he wakes up in an empty bed; sometimes he’s working and he gets a sudden call from school; sometimes the twins cry and mutter something of the past; and in all those moments he thinks, here it comes.

The twins turn thirteen in a week. Aaron goes on a date with Katelyn in two days. Andrew spends most of his time feeding the cats and quietly inciting them to make it for another day.

The cats, for themselves, grow. Nicky comes home from the night with Ichirou to find out Roland and the twins came up with a list of names but were stuck with different opinions so they’d decided he’d pick from the final drafts.

Sir Fat Cat McCatterson and King Fluffkins it is, then. Nicky watches Aaron sulk and Andrew reluctantly trying out the names and he feels his heart swell a bit. Because, wouldn’t you see?

They made it another year.

“David V. Wymack! Just the man I wanted to see!”

“Well, I would hope so since you’re in my fucking shop, Hemmick.” Wymack frowns when Nicky
lands his elbow with a flourish on the counter and hops his chin on his palm. “What’s the shit-eating grin for?”

Matt is taking care of making some kind of latte, but he’s clearly listening in, so Nicky makes sure to pull himself straighter and to clear his throat. “So,” he opens, keeping his voice as low as possible. “What are your daughter’s intentions with my kid?”

Matt spills the latte. Wymack’s mouth falls open and Nicky starts to wonder if perhaps he had no idea of the date. Ops.

“What the fuck?” Wymack says, and Nicky thinks, shit.

“Nothing! Just joking! Oh, would you look at the time?! I need to go, bye!”

“What— Hemmick! Come back here!”

Nicky is potentially very, very dead.
The Twins vs Puberty & Aaron vs Hospital

Chapter Summary

This was roughly the last piece of Canon that I missed in here and I cannot say I was missing it, but here we are, so let's dance.

Warning for: Mention of past child abuse (on Nicky) very vaguely; Non-Consensual Drug Assumption; Underage Drinking.

For all Nicky loves his twins, when they get into one of their moods in which they seemingly can’t stand each other’s sight and every reason is good for a war, he’d trade them both for a 1$ Target face-mask, with only minimum regret.

Aaron scoffs at him, “you would so regret it and come back crying,” at the same time as Andrew shrugs, “fair enough.”

He groans. “Can you just go to school without murdering each other? For me?”

It’s half-past six. The twins should be getting ready to go to school but Aaron’s too busy texting and Andrew’s too busy applying nail-polish and neither look like they’re going to get up from the kitchen table anytime soon. Sir is giving his best rendition of a bread loaf, deeply asleep by Aaron’s feet, and King is sitting on the table staring at Andrew’s hood and potentially evaluating the jump it’d take to land in it.

Allison has a meeting with the shareholders in an hour to discuss a whole lot of major changes to all of her companies and he’s supposed to show up with the folder of dirty laundry he gathered on each one of them, then stand around and take notes for the whole six and potentially more hours they’re going to spend trying to fight her. God, it’d be all so much easier if they’d just accept that she’s overall better than them and they cannot compete. Spare everyone the trouble.

Regardless, he should be getting out of the house now and yet he’s terrified his kids are going to, like, murder each others over some spilt lacquered Mermaid Dream or a cracked screen. Though he technically now has the money to, he really doesn’t want to think about having to pay to replace either the phone or the table.

Every single parenting website had warned him that fifteen was gonna be hard, but considering he’d spent his time being fifteen praying and denying his sexuality and crying because he knew his parents were going to hate him, he’d assumed the twins’ couldn’t be that bad.

That was before he started finding suspiciously stained underwear in the laundry load, the occasional screaming matches were acerbated by random high pitches and Andrew started getting hysterical because he had more acne than his brother. Though Aaron had started to develop this red chapped rash around his mouth whenever there was a test coming up, which Abby had claimed was due to his nervous habit to lick his lips when stressed.

King coils, ready to jump.
Oh, and there is also the tiny detail that Aaron and Katelyn have been dating since a week before the twins’ thirteenth birthday while Andrew’s crushes kept burning and crashing. True enough, Aaron’s relationship seems composed exclusively of study dates and more rarely trip-to-the-park dates; but Nicky can see how it would wear out on Andrew.

Nicky grabs King with an arm before the evil beast can attack and places him back on the floor, mindless to the outraged cries he gets in return.

The only good thing is, Aaron has made it abundantly clear that he and Katelyn aren’t going anywhere past kissing anytime soon. Nicky isn’t sure what’s behind that, but he’ll take his answers when Aaron feels ready to give them.

In any case, though, fifteen is making Nicky a very exhausted parent.

“You’re late,” Andrew comments monotonously and without looking up. He is too busy applying the sticker of a black cat on the glittery teal base coat on his ring finger, so clearly he has no attention to spare for his cousin/guardian. It’s good to feel the love, indeed.

“Please, don’t burn the flat down.”

Aaron shrugs and sends him a look. “We weren’t getting the deposit back anyway.” Somehow, he keeps typing even without looking at the screen, which is a sort of black magic Nicky often considers getting him exorcized for.

He grumbles something, instead, and just grabs his messenger bag from the couch on his way to the door. This is going to be a long day.

By the time he and Allison approach the conference room and he checks his phone before turning it on silent, there are still no messages from the school about the twins skipping or arriving late, which means they got to class on time and with no life-threatening injuries at the very least.

Small victories, Nicky. Small victories.

Allison chews out thirteen of the fifteen shareholders in the room. It is absolute carnage. Nicky kinda wishes he had popcorn because that much sass is a work of art.

By the time the meeting is adjourned, it’s four in the afternoon. The twins are already at practice and won’t get out ‘till six, but Allison is sprawled on her couch, high heels thrown on the floor and an arm thrown over her eyes, and she’s waving him away early. “I’m not getting anywhere near my desk today, Nicky,” she growls when he points out the work day is technically not over yet. “Fuck off.”

He does.

He loves working for Allison.

He picks his stuff and throws his jacket on his arm. It’s June, school is almost over and the
weather’s hot enough that Nicky kinda regrets having to wear suits to work, even though he’s not humble enough not to, because they make his ass look amazing.

He’s barely gotten out of the building main door when he spots a familiar figure leaning against an awfully expensive black car parked just on the other side of the street.

His brow arches because he knows they didn’t plan this meeting, but his feet take him over before his brain can catch up. His mouth, as always, has a program of its own to get down to, “What, you stalk ing me now?”

Ichirou has no business looking this good in a boring, gray three-piece suit, not after Nicky has seen him decked in leather pants and leather vest with mandarin collar. His hair is neatly braided and still reaches the middle of his chest as it lays on one of his shoulders, which look even wider in the jacket. Did he hit the gym? The lavender tie and handkerchief in his breast pocket compliment him well.

His smile is dangerous and sends a thrill down Nicky’s spine. “I would never do something so disgraceful,” he assured. “I simply like to keep an eye on my competition.”

“Oh, so now I’m competition?” but he’s smiling, he knows it, because Ichirou has a hand resting neatly on his side.

“You, Nicholas,—” he lifted one of Nicky’s hands gently to lay a butterfly kiss on his knuckles, “—are the invaluable jewel I still can’t believe Reynolds snatched away before I could.”

“Wow. That was smooth as fuck.”

Ichirou laughs. Nicky has a feeling not many people are shameless enough to be this unpolished in front of him. “But did it work?”

Nicky checks his watch, but it’s still barely ten past four and there still are those famous two hours before he has to go and pick up the twins. There’s a bunch of notes in his bag that he was planning on sorting through within these miraculous, extra two hours.

Oh, who is trying to kid?

“Of course it worked, you know I’m fucking easy. Your hotel?”

Ichirou pulls him in and kisses him so hard Nicky bends backward a bit and almost drops his jacket on the asphalt. He pulls back just as suddenly to bring his mouth to Nicky’s ear. “You know I don’t appreciate my jewels to undervalue themselves.”

The timber of his voice has changed, yet it’s almost more familiar than his normal one. So much deeper, so much firmer. A command without an order.

Nicky shivers. “Sorry.”

Ichirou’s mouth says, “you’ll be.” His eyes say, not really, but damn will I make you crumble. “Shall we get in the car?”

Nicky gets in the car.
The bed has black silk sheets this time and Nicky sinks into them, utterly mellow and unresisting under Ichirou’s hands as the man massages some kind of ointment on the rope marks around his forearms and on his chest and back. They’re so light Nicky would forgo the treatment, but Ichirou is a meticulous person so he lets him.

So he’s lying there, prone on the mattress, when it comes to his mind. “So, you know Allison?” She’s the only one who could have told him Nicky was getting an early leave.

Ichirou hums. “That didn’t sound like jealousy.” He caps the bottle of ointment again. “Reynolds and I have had a couple face-off in the business and a few more in the personal, but we’re generally civil to each others. Her message today was a nice break from our routine.”

“Good to know for sure I’m not going to get in trouble for sleeping with the enemy.”

“ Probably not.” When Nicky turns on his side to look up, Ichirou is smiling. “We mostly dabble in different fields now, anyway. The last time we crossed paths it was about a sport magazine I own; they made a vaguely homophobic article about families in the Exy field and your boss took it upon herself to dedicate an whole collection to a lesbian couple with a kid. I was rather pleased with her initiative, actually, I have to say it. I only found out about the article after it was published myself, but she was faster than me in taking care of the whole deal. It was the last time I sent her flowers in apology and she sent me back a picture of her middle finger.”

Nicky blinks a few times before he goes from sleepy to, “Oh shit.” Oh shit, shit, shit. “You’re a Moriyama?!”

Ichirou’s soft smile vanishes immediately, as do his hands. Nicky pulls himself to sit and instinctively tries to cover himself with the sheets.

It’s been long, since the first time he dealt with that name. When he helped out with Laila and Sara, he’d decided not to look further into the matter, uninterested in fixating himself with someone he would hopefully not have to deal with again. And Ichirou was a nice distraction never intended to become important, which made extremely silly and embarrassing to ask for his name after the fourth time they had kinky BDSM sex in his rooms.

Isn’t fate ironic?

Fuck it. He feels sick.

Now, the man is on his feet and facing out the window. His back is turned to the bed and Nicky can see the scratches he left there himself. “I don’t know what you’ve heard of my family, Nicholas,” Ichirou says. “But when I say I left it, I mean that I cut all ties with any and all of them. I have no interest in their practices whatsoever. What had already been passed to my name when I turned eighteen, I sold. I built what I have now on that money, alone.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Nicky admits, shaking just a bit. Was it this cold before?

He thinks of Kevin’s arm in a cast, of Jean’s bruised legs. He thinks of the terror of almost as he hugged Andrew in their kitchen while Wymack tried to get his son to stop crying.

“How personal?” Ichirou turns, and frowns as he looks at Nicky. “My family is strictly based in Japan. I fail to see how you could have crossed their path.”

“Are you shitting me?!” he hisses, unable to stop the poison from his lips. He fails to see? Nicky barely saw just in time.
He’s up and dressing himself with twitchy sharp movements. Ichirou is still frowning and staring, but makes no motion to stop him physically from leaving. He says, “I am really at a loss here, Nicholas. What is going on?”

“Riko Moriyama,” Nicky says, spits. Why is the fucking belt so hard to buckle?! “Name rings a bell?”

“Not at all.”

That stops him. Not the words, as the confusion in them. Nicky looks up from his crumpled shirt to find Ichirou’s tilted head. And he just looks so honestly lost, naked and confused in his own apartment, that Nicky’s anger wobbles for a second. “Really?”

“Why would I lie about it?”

“Because the kid was admitted to a psychiatric hospital after he spent a good year abusing two of his classmates?” He never asked about Riko past what Abby told him, and even she lost any and all news of him after the end of the trial. He doesn’t regret it. The twins, and Kevin and Jean, wanted to forget it all ever happened and Nicky was fine following suit.

Ichirou shakes his head. “I know nothing of this. Perhaps a homonym?”

Perhaps. But what are the chances, when one has Nicky’s luck? “What about Tetsuji Moriyama?”

This time, Ichirou’s reaction is far different. For all his demeanor, Nicky can see his abs clench as he pulls in a breath. He stops moving, almost completely, though the muscles under his skin strain and loosen for a moment longer, as if striving to get him to move or run when all that’s keeping him rooted in place is his will.

Nicky’s shoulders drop, because he knows that kind of reaction.

“Oh,” Ichirou says, voice just the tiniest bit strained. “How unpleasant that I have to admit to knowing this one.”

When he moves, it’s to throw his legs off the side of the bed and sit there on the edge, showing only his back. Nicky hesitates, considers leaving and cutting everything off, but ends up fidgeting on the spot. “Not a homonym, uh?”

Ichirou laughs darkly. “No, not this one.” He sighs, and Nicky moves to stand closer, just to his side, enough to see his face and try to read his expression. “Tetsuji is my uncle on my father’s side. We did not have much contact when I was a child, and those we had I do not recall fondly. I was rarely home even as a child, I attended a boarding school since I was twelve, and therefore I only met him at the major family events I was required to attend. He was… an unsavory man.”

“He’s been convicted for child abuse,” Nicky admits, because he can guess what stands behind unpleasant now. “For what he did to Riko.”

“When I was a child? I’ve never even known to have a cousin. I wasn’t even aware my uncle had any interest in activities other than hoarding money.” This is not the kind of situation Nicky ever thought he’d be finding himself in. He hesitates, once more, but Ichirou looks up and reads him like an open book. “Or not?”

Nicky fakes a shrug. “Last I knew of, Tetsuji was Riko’s uncle.”

“Impossible,” Ichirou says. “My father and his brother are the only children of my grandfather.
And I would have known if I—“ His eyes go vacant for a moment, then he frowns. “How old was the child?”

Nicky counts mentally. “He should be fifteen now, I think? Roughly.“

Ichirou rises. Nicky watches him pace around the room for a while as he speaks to himself. “I had just left my family, fifteen years ago. It would stand to reason that my father would try to have another heir. But it makes no sense for him to send the child to Tetsuji. Unless he was found somehow lacking, if I were to guess.”

Nicky lets him rant away. He’s not sure how he feels right now, so he just shuffles his weight from side to side, wishing desperately to just finish dressing and leaving the apartment.

Riko had been like an asteroid falling and missing Earth by a few centimeters alone. Nicky had watched it, felt its scorching pain and fell on his knees as the adrenaline of the almost left him. In no universe he could have foreseen this, he is very much aware of it, and still his brain is a shitty clanging machine spitting rage, indignation and shame all over his head.

Why is it that every time Nicky sleeps with someone he makes a mess of his kids’ lives?

“I need to go,” he says, when the yelling in his brain starts getting too loud for his logic to fight.

Ichirou stops pacing. When he turns, there’s a conflicted look on his face that lasts a couple seconds before he nods. “Allow me to drive you home, at least,” he says, voice low and surprisingly meek. “I will not contact you first again, but I wouldn’t feel at ease knowing I let you walk out of a session alone and so soon after the end of a scene.”

Nicky wants to say, it’s not necessary, it wasn’t that intense, I can go on my own, but he’s been trained to the rules of safety since he first started working at Eden’s and he knows better than downplaying the buckling in his knees and the pulling of his skin. He’s still a bit dazed at the edges of his mind and the chaos of the latest minutes won’t help him.

When he nods, he looks down to the floor. He might know this is the best option, but that doesn’t mean it’s any easier for him to accept.

Ichirou, if anything, dresses silently and doesn’t try to touch him past a polite palm to his back as he leads them to the garage and the car.

“Were they yours? The children Riko abused?”

“No, not— He tried to get one, but mine told him off. He came to tell me what was going on and I informed the other parents.”

“I see. I… apologize. I am aware it does nothing and means even less, considering the circumstances, but I wouldn’t feel at ease not even saying this much.”

I’m sorry, Nicky thinks. I’m sorry Tetsuji hurt you first and then him and you found out like this. I’m sorry I’m turning my back on this. I’m sorry you’re apologizing for something you didn’t even know about. “I need to go.”

He climbs from the car and into his. It’s fifteen to six. He drives to the twins’ gym silently.
Andrew and Aaron know something is going on, they’re not dumb or blind, but they don’t push. Well, Andrew glares daggers in Nicky’s nape and Aaron keeps kicking his brother’s ankle whenever he tries to open his mouth, but it’s still rather demure, especially for the two of them.

They get home and Nicky gets dinner started immediately. He sends Aaron to load the laundry and Andrew to set the table, then he focuses solely on making food. If he doesn’t think about it too much, it won’t be a problem.

“I have my driving class tonight,” Andrew reminds him, which somehow still sounds like, who should I kill? Totally not reassuring when the kid is just this close to earning his driver’s license.

“I remember. You feeling alright for it?”

“It’s not different from the others.”

“It’s about parking and you’re gay. That’s the worst lesson for us.”

“The only reason you get away with all this stereotyping is because you incarnate every single one.”

“I’ve seen you drive,” Aaron pipes from the living room. “You’re no better than him.”

“You’ve never driven a single time in your life!”

“I don’t want to!”

“Yeah, because you’re a coward.”

“And you’re a dumbass piece of—“

For once, the familiar fighting is a welcome distraction.

Andrew is the worst driver ever so Nicky spends the two hours that he’s out practicing, praying to God that Aaron doesn’t become an only child. It keeps him busy enough that he comes down from the adrenaline of today, at least a bit.

Aaron is a bit fidgety. He sprawls on the couch besides Nicky, feet tucked under his thigh and head on the armrest. The ever present phone is firmly planted on his chest, but his attention is on the not-so-funny gags show playing on TV. The cats use him as their own personal pillow. “I’ve seen Andrew pulling funnier shit,” he dryly comments once, but makes no move to change the channel. He keeps curling and uncurling his toes under Nicky.

“I’ve got proof that you’re no better.”

“No, you don’t, because I so am.”

“Did you win Mr Humbleness this year? Getting it five times in a row must be quite the accomplishment for you!”
“I try not to let it get to my head.”

They go to pick Andrew up. His instructor looks only slightly spooked and Nicky waves at him half in greeting and half in apology. He so doesn’t envy the poor soul.

Andrew sulks a bit, complains about parallel parking and claims that nobody on the planet can park right for shit. Nicky sweats cold.

Then at home the twins look at each other. They do that thing, sometimes, when they share conversations with just a few glances and Nicky has given up trying to decipher them.

“We’re going to watch a movie in bed,” Aaron announces.

Nicky blinks. “I don’t need the TV if you want to watch it on the couch?”

“It’s porn,” Andrew says. Nicky rolls his eyes, because he’s pretty sure these two are at that moment in their lives in which they’d fight even about what porn is good to watch. Also, Aaron looks too scandalized for it to be the truth; it’s just Andrew’s to go to excuse to try and get Nicky to stop bothering him, like it ever worked.

“It’s a school project,” Aaron corrects. “For the final presentation in chemistry.”

“Aaron hates chemistry.”

“I hate school. Do not diminish my opinions like that.”

Such a drama queen. Nicky rolls his eyes. “Whatever, go and do whatever it is that you don’t want to share with your loving, supportive, caring, fun—“

“Night, Nicky.” The chorus of voices come just before the slamming of their door.

Nicky sighs.

He’s not really happy that the twins share less with him now, but he’s also kind of aware that’s how it goes. He’s letting them gain independence, he tells himself. Also, he’d lie if he were to say he’s in the mood to pretend he’s perfectly peachy at the moment.

He washes the dishes, cleans the tablecloth, rearranges the kitchen tools. He tidies up the living room and zaps his way through all the channels in TV twice before sighing and giving up.

When he knocks on the bedroom door of the twins he gets no answer. Since the door is jarred, he only feels a tiny bit bad for spying in.

The light might be on, but the kids are out cold. They’re buried deep under their covers even though it’s rather hot, and they’re both snoring lightly.

The guilt is back there, fighting with the logic saying he didn’t know, couldn’t have guessed, didn’t do anything wrong anyway. This time, it abates a bit to the sight of the twins’ peaceful expressions.

He leans a temple against the doorframe and stays there for a moment, contemplating how different his life would have been if these two dumbasses hadn’t been thrown into it without a warning. He doesn’t think he’d like it. Sure, shit’s hard and there have been moments so low he’d wanted so badly to rip his hair out and cry for a consecutive week, but he’d never spiraled down so bad as when he was in conversion therapy. Even since he’d gotten the twins, there had been a thick line that his brain had refused to cross because who was going to take care of them if Nicky gave
up? If he stopped to exist, if he died?

They’d been the only thing making him clench his teeth and push through another day.

“I love you guys so much,” he whispers, too low for it to disturb them. “I love you so goddamn much.”

His eyes are prickling, so he pushes himself off the frame and clicks the light off before closing the door. *Keep it together, Nicky.*

He keeps it together through washing up, getting in his pajamas and collecting the notes sprawled on his bed in a more or less aligned pile on his table before face planting into his mattress. He hisses into the pillow.

Tomorrow is Saturday and he technically is not supposed to go in unless there is an emergency. He could spend the day with the twins, beg and whine and cry until they agree to spend the day with the family. Maybe they could stop by Eden’s and say hello, then they could drive to Charleston or somewhere close by and spend the day at the beach. It could be nice.

He keeps thinking about it until he falls asleep.

Okay. When he understands which one of the two little shits changed his ringtone to fucking *Chihuaha*—

Nicky cusses a storm as his heart struggles to go back to a normal rate, and meanwhile he glares at the offending device still buzzing and sounding on the bedside table. The clock just besides it says it’s *Too Early For This Shit O’ Clock*, which doesn’t help.

He grabs the phone with all intentions of starting a lecture, but he frowns when he reads the name on the display. What the fuck is Jean Moreau calling him for a fucking three a.m.?

Which is roughly what he asks when he finally answers the umpteenth round of chorus.

“*Mister Hemnick,*” the boy says. His voice is tense enough that Nicky doesn’t bother correcting him, this time. “I’m so sorry, I don’t—I didn’t know what else to do.”

Okay. Actually, no, absolutely Not Okay, but Nicky’s awake now. “What happened, Jean? Where are you?”

It’s too late, and too scary. Jean is seventeen and Nicky saw him grow into an aloof, if a bit cold to a first approach, moody teenager, but it’s been a long time since he’d heard this kid’s voice and thought, he’s terrified. The irony of Riko coming back to mind once again is noticed but not appreciated.

“*Jack Leverett’s house, on Breckenridge Street. We— He’s throwing a party for summer’s beginning. His parents aren’t home.*”

Nicky hangs on the we before he does on the name of the kid. He out of bed and striding through the apartment as his brain processes: Leverett was an older kid, he was playing middle school Exy when Andrew and Aaron had just started grade school. The twins knew him because he volunteered to help the little league team every so often.
The twins’ bedroom door is closed, but when he opens it, the beds are unmade and absolutely empty.

*Fuck, shit, fuck!*

“Stay where you are, I’m coming.”

Nicky takes the car in his pajamas and breaks half a dozen traffic laws, but luckily the address is not far and there are no police cars to chase him down. When he stops in front of the place, the house is lit in almost every window and music is pounding from inside. Through the window he can see a bunch of people, mostly college students if he were to take a guess, and another few scattered in the garden. Someone is puking in a bush and the air has the sweet scent of marijuana mixed with smoke.

Jean is on the entrance door. His sheer bulk is enough to keep it open but there’s clearly a guy a little smaller than him trying to fight with him, and failing as he gets ignored with masterful skill. When Jean notices him, he stiffens just lightly.

“I didn’t want to come here,” he says, first thing, but he moves aside to lead Nicky in. He moves in brisk steps and scares people aside with his scowl alone. “Andrew wanted someone to know where they’d gone in case something happened. I told him it was a bad idea, but he didn’t listen to me. I came over the moment he texted me that they’d come anyway, but I couldn’t make them leave. And then Aaron got sick so they barricaded themselves in the service bathroom and I called you.”

“What do you mean, he got sick?!”

“I don’t know, Andrew dragged him away!” Nicky has known Jean long enough to recognize the strain in his voice. “I’m sorry, really. I didn’t want to get them in troubles.”

Too late for that, Nicky wants to say, but he keeps his mouth shut. Jean wasn’t the type of guy to go to parties, he was a loner, shy, and exceptionally content with sitting in the shade with a book. There was no doubt that he’d come to the party just to check on his friends, and that he’d called the moment he felt something dangerous was going on. Nicky didn’t want to discourage that.

Still. Shit. Fuck, shit, shit, shit, fuck.

The twins are so in troubles when he gets them.

There’s a dude and two girls banging on the bathroom door and demanding to be let in. Nicky grabs him by the shoulder and bodily pulls him back. The guys is well on his way to alcohol coma, but in a couple moments he realizes the person in front of him is rather too old to be here and pales. Nicky scowls. “I’ve called the police on my way here so every single one of you better get the fuck away now.”

The three don’t need any more persuasion.

Nicky bangs his fist on the door. “Andrew!,” he yells, over the sound of musing and now yells as people hurry to leave the house. “Andrew, it’s me! Let me in!”

There’s fumbling from inside that goes on too long for comfort before, finally, Nicky hears the click of key in the hole. He might shoulder the door open with a bit too eagerness.
Andrew looks lost. His eyes are wide and red and his hands are frozen midway like his first
instinct is still to try and close the door again, keep Nicky out. Just behind him, Aaron throws up
again in the WC and slumps heavily to a side.

“Did he drink?” Nicky asks, moving past ‘Drew with a fast squeeze to his arm. He gets down on
his knees just behind Aaron and tries to keep him straight enough not to choke on his own vomit.
He pushes sweaty hair out of his forehead. “Aaron, how much did you drink?!”

“He only drink half a beer,” Andrew says. It’s low, too low, and when Nicky looks at him he’s still
frozen where he was, except now Jean is holding him by the shoulders and he looks like he would
fall to the ground if not for his friend. “We split. I wasn’t watching his glass. He said he left it on a
counter for a moment as he helped someone stand up after they fell. I wasn’t there, I didn’t see it.
He came to look for me because he said something was wrong and then he dropped down.”

Aaron left his glass unattended, and immediately after he started feeling sick.

Nicky whips his phone out of his pocket again, cussing all the while. Punching 911 in makes his
skin crawl.

Aaron goes limp in his arms.

The ambulance comes and gets Aaron in an oxygen mask and a IV. They ask Andrew, what did he
take?, kid, you’re not getting him in troubles, just tell us what he tried so we can help him
faster. Andrew keeps saying he doesn’t know. Nicky believes him.

They get Aaron to the hospital. Nicky joins them on the ambulance, while Jean drives Andrew by
car. Having the twins split and out of his control is making Nicky twice as nervous but he focuses
on holding Aaron’s hand and whispering that it’s going to be okay. The paramedics are all too kind
to contradict him.

Then they get him to the hospital and a nurse stops Nicky outside the doors. “We’re taking over
from here.”

“But—!”

“They’re going to pump his stomach and run a blood test. We’ll inform you as soon as we know
more.”

Nicky is forced to stay, the words Personnel Only blaring red into his eyes. For a moment, he can
just stare and run his hands through his hair. Jesus Fuck. He thinks he might be hyperventilating.

“Nicky?” He turns.

Andrew looks ready for WWIII to land on his shoulders, is stiff like he thinks he deserves it too.
Jean, just behind him, has his chin tilt low but stands straight enough to look ready to intervene if
anything happens.

It would be so easy. Nicky has all the words in his mouth, what the fuck were you thinking?, what
the actual fuck, Andrew! You’re fifteen! You went to a college party full of alcohol and drugs, did
you even know anyone there?!, did you consider that this might happen?! Why, for fuck’s sake, did
you think it was a good idea to split?! You’re not an idiot, Andrew! You know better than this shit!
How many times have you been to fucking Eden’s, uh? What did I tell you? What did Rolan, Josh, literally everybody ever told you?! Give me a reason! A single explanation as to what made you think this was a goddamn good idea?!

It would be too easy. Andrew is ready for a blow to fall, it’s so blatant. He’s wearing a crop top Nicky didn’t buy him and skinny jeans with studs and, god, he has a fake earring to his left ear. He’s never looked so painfully young than he does now, pretending to be a grown up.

And Nicky has never been good at discipline, never been good at screaming matches and rage and teaching lessons. He’s just crying already, he knows, because Aaron is hurting and Andrew is scared and Nicky should have checked, he should have realized, when have they ever gone to bed like that?!

He doesn’t want to fight. He should, probably, but he really—

He opens his arms. Andrew stands shock-still for a moment before hesitantly stepping forward, into the hug. He doesn’t return it immediately, he seems confused by Nicky’s hand getting in his hair, his arm holding his back. Not much different from when he’d just moved in, uh?

Nicky hugs him tighter. Jean relaxes.

All at once, Andrew starts crying. He doesn’t say anything, but Nicky knows the I’m sorry’s hidden in his broken breaths, he knows it.

He’s been yelling the same with every breath for the past thirty minutes.

Aaron results positive to ecstasy. Nicky tries to wrap his head around it, but he can’t. The doctor sits him down and tells him it’s a fifty-fifty chance that Aaron took it willingly versus that, as Andrew claims, someone put it in his glass without his knowledge. “It’s a trend,” the man says, low. “It’s a college students party. Kids sneak in and try to act older. Or older guys spot them, recognize that they’re that much younger and decide to play a prank.”

“A prank.” He sounds empty, but his head is full. How? A prank. A prank gone the worst way because Aaron had an allergic reaction to something in the drug. First exposition didn’t hit him too bad, but a second, he is told, could very well be fatal. He should get an epi-pen, for his own safety. Nicky’s brain is still stuck: someone put ecstasy in his kid’s glass as a prank and it almost killed him.

“Mister Hemmick, the Social Services have been notified,” the man continues. By the look in his eyes, he’s almost as happy about this as Nicky. “Aaron’s social worker should be here shortly.”

He is.

Charles Whittier is a man maybe a bit older than Wymack. He told Nicky to call him Chuck and shook his hand firmly when he showed up to claim the kids. Through the worst times, he’d done his best to help Nicky keep them, had believed that he was the best choice for them for the longest time, before even Nicholas himself. But this—

Chuck has more white hair than Nicky remembers him with, and eyes so much sadder. “Nicholas,” he says, and nothing else.
Nicky holds Andrew closer to his chest. He’s asleep and exhausted, he doesn’t need to see this.

Chuck shakes his head. He shakes Andrew’s leg and almost gets a kick to the face in return, he pulls back just in time. Andrew is still, ready to strike again, when he recognizes him and his eyes widen. “What are you doing here?” To Nicky, “What is he doing here?!”

“Andrew—“

“Your brother is in the hospital, Andrew,” Chuck says, firm. He looks unfazed despite the previous attack. “You know perfectly well why I’m here.”

“It’s not Nicky’s fault! Tell him that it’s not!”

Nicky doesn’t. Instead, he tightens his grip just a second, memorizes the feeling, before loosening it a bit. He stares at Chuck, who nods. “I’m here to make sure it isn’t, Andrew. In the meanwhile, it would be better if you go with Higgins, alright? I need to talk with Nicholas.”

“I’m not going with the pig!” Andrew shrugs Nicky off him, stares at him with the most betrayed look. Nicky wants to grab him, tell him he knows!, but this is the worst case scenario coming to life, a hole opened under his feet to swallow him all the way to the centre of Earth. Andrew is smart, he knows this much. He clearly doesn’t care. “I’m not going!”

“Andrew,” Chuck’s voice is slowly turning firmer. “It would be best for everyone if you go quietly, now.”

“Don’t patronize him,” Nicky snaps, instinctively, just to remember under the other’s glare that he’s supposed to be on his side. “Andrew, just go, okay? We’ll fix this, you’ll see. I just need to talk with Chuck for a bit and then you can come back.”

Andrew’s fists clench. “What if he wakes up?”

“We’ll call you immediately, I swear.” It’s the most he can promise, right now.

He is not happy about this, clearly, but when Agent Higgins walks into their corridor, Andrew follows him out. Nicky hears something about a donut or a hot drink. He doesn’t hear Andrew’s answer, but he probably offered none, knowing him.

Chuck turns to him as soon as the two are out of sight. “What the fuck, Nicky.”

“They sneaked out,” he says. He’s still shell-shocked by it all. Four hours ago he was sleeping in his bed and knew nothing of this. “A friend of theirs called me when Aaron started collapsing. I don’t know why Andrew didn’t, I— I rushed them here as soon as I got to the place and found what was going on.”

Chuck swears. He paces once, twice, thrice in front of the seats Nicky never found the strength to get up from, and then stops abruptly. “It would be a goddamn mess in any case, Nicky, but any other moment, I could do something about it. The twins are teenagers, some form of rebellion can happen and both Andrew and their friend assure Aaron didn’t take the drug willingly?”

“He wants to be a doctor, Chuck! He’s been thinking about how to get into med school since he was six! He wouldn’t risk ruining it for a night of partying, I know it.”

“Okay, so it was an accident. Worse, it was a deliberate crime against him, he was a victim. I could have spun it around in my report.”
“But?” Because of course there’s a but, when is there not?

Chuck has the same somber expression he had when he relied to Nicky what had been found in Tilda’s apartment and on the twins’ bodies. “I shouldn’t be telling you.”

“Oh fuck that, Chuck! This isn’t the moment to—“

“Your father reached out to me a month ago. He wanted to talk to me about taking the twins in from you, now that they are older.”

Some days, during summer, the sun shines so bright and hot it burns the careless skin. It’s a beautiful day and the sky is clear blue until, in a second, it’s not anymore. All goes dark, it starts to pour out of nothing and if you don’t find a shelter, the grains of hail hit you like a merciless lapidation. Nicky feels the round bruises blow on his skin.

On his legs and his arms and his thighs and this is for your own good, Nicholas, this is for your salvation.

He’s never felt so damned.
Nicky Vs The Foster System

Chapter Summary

Nicky freaks out and then moves on the offensive to get his kids back. Andrew and Aaron have a couple horrible days. Luther sucks, as always.

Chapter Notes

Warning for Child Abuse: Andrew meets Steven, from Canon, but don't worry, I make sure this time he gets out in time; Seth implies he's been physically abused but not sexually. Nothing is graphic but still, be careful.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They take Andrew away. They tell Nicky to leave the hospital. Voices pile up in his head, overlapped by memories and nightmares and mantras he’d sworn himself he’d never listen to again.

It’s all mechanical after that.

He drives home, he packs a bag for Andrew and then watches emptily as Chuck unmakes it to move all its contents into a plastic bag. Nicky watches quietly.

They get a bag for Aaron too. The room looks emptier than ever when he stares at it from the door.

“Hey, buddy.”

Either Matt’s hands are bigger than he remembers or he shrunk in the past few hours. Probably the latter, because Nicky truly feels small, smaller, the smallest he’s ever been, and weak.

Matt spins him around and meets no resistance — what’s the point?, they took his kids — and leads him through the flat. In the corridor outside, Jean is squeezing the life out of Renee’s shirt and his eyes are far away and glassy.

Stephanie reaches out to touch Nicky’s face soberly. “You shouldn’t be alone, right now.”

And ain’t that fucking funny? Because Nicky is. He fucking is because his parents hate him and they took his kids. They took his kids.

“You’re staying with us for a bit,” Matt says, and Nicky can’t read his tone, mainly because he can’t be bothered to. “Come on. We’ll get out of this, somehow.”

Except there’s nothing to get out of, except his two-bedroom apartment that now has one room and two twin-beds in excess, because they took his kids.
They took his kids.

They took his kids.

Andrew and Aaron. His kids. His babies. They took them. From him. Because he wasn’t— He wasn’t good enough, smart enough, attentive enough. He was neglectful and distracted and selfish and he lost them because they would be so much better off with anyone else than him, he is a fuck-up, a disgrace, a sinner, he is—

They took his kids.

They took his kids, they took his kids, they took his—

Nicky has scars. He doesn’t pay them much mind because he doesn’t have the time to bother with such tiny details when he’s working to support two kids.

He doesn’t have two kids to support now, so he looks at them in the bathroom, in the guest bedroom in Matt and Dan’s apartment.

Some are years old and shaped like lightening under his skin in quarter-of-dollar rounds on his thighs and crotch. Some are older yet and almost faded, thinnest crisscrosses on his inner thighs and high on his forearms, almost at the elbows. He used to wear plastic bands around his wrists to snap against his skin whenever he had a bad thought, and they never left permanent marks but he can feel the skin burn anyway.

*It was always bound to happen*, says a voice in his head. It’s calm and collected and reasonable and sounds like his father’s preaching. *You were never a good choice for them and social services aren’t dumb, they were bound to see it eventually. What, did you think you were fooling anyone?*

He stands in front of the bathroom and watches his face reflected in the mirror.

He’s not going to cut himself again. He’s over that and he’s never giving the twins that kind of burden. Even if they took them away and he’s not going to— He’s not going to—

What if he never sees them again?

Wymack drags him out of the bathroom that he’s still crying and trashing and screaming. Dan looks like she’s staring at a ghost and she’s holding Matt in her arms.

Nicky doesn’t know. How long it has been, what everyone is doing here, where are the twins. How Aaron is. Lord, he doesn’t know how Aaron is.

He blacks out.

He comes to with a stinging cheek and gasps in his ears.

“Allison, for fuck’s sake!” Dan’s hissing, but Nicky can’t see her because Allison’s face is all up in his and she’s *seething*.

In a low, poisonous voice she asks, “Are you done?” Nicky hiccups and lowers his eyes, but she grabs his face, his cheeks, and forces him to stare back at her. “No,” she growls. “Are you. Fucking. Done.”

He doesn’t know.

“This is your last quarter of hour, Hemmick. I’m letting you cry the last of it out now and when the
fifteen minutes are up you better have your ass in the shower or I swear to fucking God I’ll drag you there myself and soak you into the coldest water until you turn into a popsicle or grow back a brain, you heard me?”

Just barely.

When he stands up and moves to the bathroom, he doesn’t really believe he’s going to shower. He’s planning on staying in front of the mirror and cry some more, because that’s all he’s been doing lately; except that he steps in and the phone in his pocket is buzzing with a notification from Instagram. It’s so outright absurd he feels an hysterical laughter build up in his chest and he has to bite his own knuckles not to let it out.

It says, Erik Klose, and it’s an aesthetic picture of the sight from the window of what Nicky has learnt to recognise as Erik’s office.

He chokes on his breath.

Erik’s office at the law firm. The law firm where he practices as a lawyer with specialisation in Family Law.

Family Law.

It’s the thinnest wall coming down to let the water of the dam wash away every logical reasoning, every logistic problem, any vicious voice. It drags his finger over to type a context-less, Thank you, and then his whole body out of the bathroom and Allison regards him with an arched brow, but he ignores her.

For the first time in a while, Nicky takes in the world around him.

Matt is pale as a sheet and curled over Dan as she holds him by the waist and kiss his shoulder in reassurance. Renee is there too, sitting on the armchair and looking over the situation quietly, expression just a shade darker than her usual, just enough to be terrifying. Wymack looks so much older than he did a week ago.

They’re all here. All except Roland, and God, he didn’t even tell Roland.

He wouldn’t know what to tell him.

He says, “I need to know about Aaron,” and his voice is low and cracked and dusty like an broken frame hidden in the attic. “And I need a loan.“

Allison doesn’t even blink. “Glad to see we got a step one. You think you can hold yourself together now, or do I need to slap you again?”

Nicky touches his cheek, which is still smarting from the first hit. He says, “maybe,” but he sits down on the couch and runs hands over his face.

Renee stands up quietly. “I’ll make coffee.”

They all settle.

Finding out about Aaron is actually surprisingly easy. Nicky only has to spam call Chuck’s phone for an hour before the man gives up.

“Took you about time,” he says, though, as if what they’re doing was perfectly normal. “He’s out of
Breathing comes a bit easier. He can smell coffee and closed air. He’s tired. “What about Andrew?”

He’s at the window in the kitchen, because in the living room Dan and Renee are writing down names of people they know, and Matt and Wymack went over to Nicky’s to get him some stuff and check what’s missing from the twins’. Allison is in the bedroom because she’s yelling at her lawyers.

Chuck sighs. “He’s in a foster home, at the moment.”

“A foster home?! For fuck’s sake, Chuck, he’s—“

“It was the best option at the moment, Nicholas,” there’s a edge in his voice, a bit of anger steeping through no matter what how hard he tried to keep it in. ”Your parents were insisting I let them have him, but I’m not sure it would have been a good idea.”

Andrew’s coming to terms with his sexuality hadn’t been as struggling and hard and painful as Nicky’s, but it hadn’t been easy either. He’d seen the consequences of hatred on his cousin’s skin and the hurt from Drake had taken so long to resolve. Luther’s hands on Andrew were a nightmare that had woken Nicky up at night even before his father came into the picture for real.

He gulps. “You can’t let that happen, Chuck. You really, really, can’t let that happen.”

“I’m trying to do what’s best for Andrew,” which isn’t an outright yes, but it’s as close as Chuck will get to admit it. “What did you really call me for?”

About that. “I just wanted to warn you.” And how hard it is to believe this, even as he says the words himself. “I’m taking this to court. I want the twins back.”

Allison had flipped him off when she’d learnt he needed the loan to get a good lawyer, and immediately got to work to hire an army of hers. Nicky knows this doesn’t mean it’s going to be easy or fast, but being a white rich girl is certainly speeding shit up faster than a Mexican gay man would have gotten. It’s fucking shit, but Nicky has no time to fight the good fight right now.

He’s selfish and scared and he wants his kids back.

Chuck is silent for a long time. “If you think this is the best course of action,” he says diplomatically, in the end. Nicky doesn’t wonder why is that.

He couldn’t give less of a shit, honestly.

Chuck only offers him the bare bones of how something like this would work out. Meetings with a lot of people, psychologists and social workers, just like the first time he applied to get custody of the twins; and a judicial hearing at the minors court to decide whether the twins will return to him or go to his parents. Foster care is, it’s repeated, just a temporary measure.

Nicky wants to tell him where he can shove his temporary measures, but he doesn’t. He’s very polite instead and says all the hello’s and goodbye’s before hanging up.

When he turns away from the window, he almost shrikes in terror.
Allison scoffs at him, but doesn’t move an inch out of his space or lower the hand that she has all but in his face. It’s holding her phone; Nicky needs to blink twice and lean back with his neck to read the screen.

The ticking seconds count the duration of a call with Moriyama. Nicky’s blood freezes. “Allison, this doesn’t—”

“This does,” she interrupts him. “We’re over pride and dignity, remember? He’s got connections and you need them. Swallow, Hemmick; I know you can.”

She lets go of her phone, rather than give it, and Nicky flounders to try and catch it before it falls on the ground. When he finally has it in his hands, firmly, she’s slipped out of the kitchen as quietly as she came, in her fifteen inches stilettos.

Nicky bites his tongue to keep all his Spanish curses in his mind, so that when he brings the device to his ear, his mouth opens and says, simply, “Hello?”

“…I’m fairly convinced I wasn’t supposed to hear those last few sentences.”

This, right here, is just proof that Nicky’s life is never done kicking him in the face when he’s down. “Ichirou, listen I—”

“Reynolds explained,” the man interrupts him. His voice is unperturbed as always, and Nicky refuses to admit that it’s the kind of firmness, the kind of stability, he longs for in the middle of this storm. “Regardless of the state of the relationship between us, you’ve given me invaluable information about my family, Nicky. I would be glad to repay my debt, somehow. Just say the word.”

It’s wrong in all the ways something can be wrong, Nicky is absolutely certain of it, but he’s never been good at right and proper and clean-cut standard-procedure shit, and life isn’t a fairy tale where good people always have their happy endings and evil ones get the punishment they deserve. Big eats small, he thinks.

His father never played fair, anyway.

“I’m saying it now,” he whispers, the lowest he’s ever spoken. “I’m begging you.”

Ichirou’s reply comes immediate. “Consider it done.” Nicky closes his eyes. Thank you, he doesn’t say. “I have to leave you, now. I will call you again.”

It is sunset outside the window. Nicky watches it turn into night as he listens to the phone falling silent.

It’s not easy to go to sleep. Matt’s bed is more comfortable than anything Nicky’s ever slept in, but the sheets coil around his legs like snakes, the heat from inside his brain spreads and leaves him sweaty, itchy and desperate, and the sounds of the cars outside are the threatening memory of a five seats truck several years in the past.

It’s been two days.

Nicky tosses and turns and cries silently in his pillow as his only way to lover the pressure building
in his chest, threatening to suffocate him, and he’s considering just giving up. He could go to the kitchen, get himself some coffee or better yet some alcohol — though he has a feeling Dan and Matt got rid of it all when they took him over — and he could sit himself down to write what Allison’s lawyers asked for their first meeting tomorrow afternoon.

“Everything works,” the woman with the New York’s accent had said. “If they ever hurt you, if they ever forgot about something on you. Miss Reynolds told me about a conversion therapy camp? I want it on paper, every single thing that happened there. If we get the right judge, that alone will be enough to shut their case down, and then we can move forward on making ours.”

Nicky’s darkest nightmare written on paper. He’d tried last evening but the page had remained just as blank as he’d felt back then.

The thing is, he doesn’t remember lots of it. There are wide blanks in his memories spanning for weeks at time that he cannot dig up no matter how much he tries. And the things he remembers, he hates viscerally because some were awful, some make him want to puke still, but some moments were those in which he felt almost, almost, good. When they told him he was making it, when they praised him for admitting his sins and fighting them, when they painted him the picture of his triumphant return home, an healed boy, a straight man. He’d hold onto those delusions with bleeding fingers, and then they turned out to be just another lie.

In paper, she asked. Are there even the words for it?

His phone buzzes on the nightstand, and at first Nicky stares at it blankly. Allison? Ichirou? Erik?

It’s four in the morning, the alarm clock says on the nightstand. Nicky gulps and sits up and pushes a hand through his hair, but the phone keeps ringing. Careful, so careful, scared that it’d, what?, explode in his hands? (If only.) He picks it up.

*Unknown number.*

Nicky sighs. Ichirou then, probably to tell him from an untraceable source that it’s done, whatever it is that he could accomplish. Nicky didn’t really ask, he didn’t really want to know the details.

What great example he’s setting, isn’t he?

His voice is strung to barely a breath of air when he answers, bone-deep tiredness laced to every single letter. “Hello?”

It sounds so stupid a greeting, and yet he can’t think of anything else.

“Nicky.”

A lightening quick recognition, wide eyes, a stray hiccup. Nicky almost chokes on his own spit. “Andrew!”

Too many words rush at his tongue, twisting it and making speaking them out impossible. Inquiries, demands, pleads, all alike and elbowing each others, but the voice at the other end of the call, pitched too high for the night but fitting adolescence like a tailored dress, interrupts them all. “Nicky,” Andrew repeats, so much distress in the forced — fake, so fake — indifference. “*Come and get me.*”

There’s so many things wrong with this situation. Nicky is not supposed to be in contact with the
twins, Luther’s lawyer might destroy him if they heard of it, claim he’d threatened or plied the twin some way, make the whole trial seem unfair, make him look suspicious and dangerous and fishy with something to hide. A call like this, in the middle of the night, and where the fuck even is Andrew? Is he calling from the foster home? Nicky can’t show up there, the parents would surely tell social services if he does!

The only right thing right now, in this whole mess, is being able to hear Andrew’s voice.

What is Nicky supposed to do?

“Tell me where you are.”

He goes.

A parking lot. Nicky will admit only to himself that he snickered hysterically to himself the whole drive there.

To the empty parking lot outside a closed mall at motherfucking four in the morning because Andrew ran away from the foster home. He’d been calling from a phone boot. Nicky hadn’t even known there were still functional phone boots in this day and age.

Because Andrew’s foster parents took his phone from him. Curfew. His twin brother was in the hospital and these assholes—

Nicky swerves a bit too tight to get into the parking lot but he can hardly care. A lamppost is flickering, more off than on, and there’s a group of people outside of the pub on the other side of the street with beer bottles in their hands and loud words on their tongues. They don’t seem belligerent, but Nicky can’t help but try and assess them for danger knowing that Andrew straight up went and asked them for spare coin for a call.

If they were good people, why hadn’t they just gave him the phone to call? Where they just too drunk and didn’t think of it?

The phone boot’s glasses are either broken and taped with trash bags or dirty beyond saving so Nicky can only guess at the shapes moving inside it, but he doubts from within it’s possible tell him apart from any other random dude. The figure is still and quiet and his heart breaks some more. “Andrew?”

The door cracks open an inch and Nicky takes in what he can see, blond hair, golden eyes and wary attention, and, fuck, he’s crying again, isn’t he?

Andrew is out of the boot and in front of him in a second. His hand fists Nicky’s jackets but the other stays wrapped around his stomach and he stops just far enough that their bodies aren’t touching.

Nicky wants to hug him so badly, but he’s attuned to the signs now. He stands still, quietly so, and takes in more details. A pyjama under a windbreaker, that’s all Andrew’s wearing and thank fuck it’s summer. Socks, two pairs of them from the looks of it, but no shoes.

No. Damn. Shoes.
Nicky telegraphs his gestures as much as he can force himself to and he puts his hands on Andrew’s cheeks, taking in his expression. The kid’s eyes have always been more telling than he liked to admit. He says, “I’m here,” because it’s all there is to it, all that will matter.

Andrew doesn’t trust words. He trusts promises and actions, and Nicky made one when he said he was coming to get him and followed through with the motions. Now it’s just about letting Andrew take it in.

It seems like an eternity when he says, “Okay,” and then he takes the last step and he doesn’t bury himself in Nicky’s chest but he raises a hand and wraps it tight around Nicky’s middle finger.

It’s a regression, Lord knows as well as Nicky, but it’s not a complete shut out, Andrew’s not so retracted he’d refuse himself even the barest touch of comfort as he did just after Linda’s death, and that’s more than anyone could have hoped for. He’s still standing still, still finding his own ways of asking and saying, and Nicky wants to destroy the world and build it better for him and Aaron.

God, Aaron.

“Uh.” Nicky looks up and blinks because, sure enough, there’s someone else in the phone booth and he has no idea of who this kid might be.

He’s black and he looks a bit older than the twins — though fairly enough they’re more often than not the ones that don’t really look their age —, but he’s wrapped in a sweatshirt over pyjamas and missing his shoes as well. If Nicky needed any more hint that the two were somehow together in this mess of a night.

Genially, he mimics the kid. “Uh?”

“Seth,” Andrew says, low. “Foster kid, same house. Helped.”

Structures rendered in bare bones of sentences, rapid words as if shooting bullets. Nicky lets Andrew’s face go just so he can tuck the kid a bit closer by pulling the hand he’s still hanging on, then he turns to Seth. “Alright, then. Can either of you tell me what’s happening?”

Seth has an angry scowl on his face, but it somehow twists even more as he grunts. “Brat wouldn’t keep quiet,” he huffed. “Was gonna get us all into troubles.”

Nicky would have doubted that even if he hadn’t known Andrew as the least likely kid to throw a tantrum in a scary, strange environment. Something in Seth’s hunched posture, in the overplayed bravado, just screams façade. Therefore, he nods. “Okay. Now, want to try with the truth?”

Seth stiffens and Nicky almost kicks himself. He raised two traumatised kids, did he forget everything about how it is already?

Andrew headbutts Nicky’s arm. He doesn’t say anything, but he’s shivering. It might be the middle of June, but it’s four in the morning and the kid just walked who knows how many blocks barefoot and terrified. It might not be cold, but Nicky doesn’t know how else to deal with it and he crushes the cuss in his mouth between his teeth and his tongue. “Alright,” he caves, not even trying. “Both of you get in the car. We can talk when you’re less likely to turn into puberty popsicles.”

Seth doesn’t seem too eager of obeying, but he takes his cues from Andrew clearly because he follows them to the car with only a couple steps distance. The men at the pub staring at the scene might have something to do with his choice.
In the car, Andrew takes shotgun, Nicky turns the engine on and gets them the fuck out of there. He drives without a real aim, just waiting for the heating to do its magic on the kids’ feet, and when he stops outside Sweetie’s, well. It’s instinct and it’s not like shit hasn’t already blown up, right?

“Banana-split,” he decides, meeting Andrew’s eyes for confirmation. “With all the chocolate and all the syrup and all the cherries the whole place has. Okay?”

Andrew nods quietly. It’s too subdued to truly be reassuring.

Nicky shoots a text to Allison while he gets the kids in. She’ll see it, she always sees everything, no matter the hour, and she’ll get her lawyers up so they can deal with this before it gets to Luther.

The waitress is a new one and doesn’t recognise him when he goes up to the counter to place their order in faster. It’s almost reassuring.

Andrew sits by the window, facing the entrance door so he can see who gets in, and he stares at Nicky until he seats beside him, a buffer wall between him and the rest of the diner. He doesn’t take his jacket off. Seth wriggles awkwardly in front of them.

“Oh, Nicky says. “Am I getting an answer now?” Seth looks at Andrew, but Andrew is destroying a napkin so he just shrugs. “Drew?”

Andrew’s hands stop.

Quietly, “The husband was scary.” Quieter, “Like Drake.”

It’s some sort of out of body experience. Nicky doesn’t feel anything. This is just another curveball thrown at his kids and it’s like he’s gotten used to the feeling, like his brain is wired to act-first freak-out-later by now.

He crosses his arms on the table and curls forward, protectively around Andrew, non-threateningly toward Seth. “Did he touch you?”

Andrew shakes his head. “He looked,” he says. “Tried to stay and watch when I was changing. Said something ‘bout behaving or else.”

“He’s an asshole,” Seth pipes in. Nicky turns to him, but he’s looking at Andrew still. Following his lead in this as well. “He never touched me, but he hits hard. He’s got this thick belt and the wooden leg of a desk he got some-fucking-where. They fucking hurt.”

Nicky lets the picture raise in his head out of a morbid need to understand how, why, someone would take the leg of a table and use it to hit a kit. What kind of fucked up sadist, with what fucking guts.

The waitress approaches them with their order, tells them cheerily to dig in and leaves their table. Nicky takes one look at the sweet and feels like puking.

Andrew has always had a stronger stomach than him and he picks his spoon to start eating. A glare and a spoon thrown to the face, in pure Andrew’s manners, and Seth is following him suit.

Nicky stares.

When his phone rings again, it says Chuck instead of Allison, but that’s okay. That’s good. Nicky has some words to tell the man.
He picks it up as he heads outside and opens with, “You huge fucking piece of shit.”

“Steven and Lorraine had perfect marks,” Chuck says, but his face is white and not for the lights of the diner. “All the surprise visits, all the interviews with the kids— none of this ever came up!”

“Well, fuck,” Wymack grousers right back. He’s sitting beside Seth because Allison dragged Nicky out to call the lawyers thirty minutes ago and Andrew demanded Renee by his side and David by his friend’s. In no words at all, of course. “I wonder how it could happen that some terrified, traumatised kids lied to the social workers about the man in whose house they lived beating the crap out of them. How impossibly strange.”

Andrew has ducked under Renee’s arm and she rested her head on his. Her eyes never left Chuck and her shoulders held the coiled strength of a snake ready to strike.

Nicky interrupted before Chuck could say anything else that would get him punched. Not that he didn’t want the man to get punched, he very much wished to do so himself, but it wouldn’t look good on their records, considering the situation.

“Allison’s lawyers contacted a judge of the juvenile court. The trial is sped up to this morning, considering the extenuating circumstances. We’re expected at eight.” He can’t help the way his eyes fall to slits as he stares at Chuck. “Aaron’s getting discharged so he can testify, the judge was adamant they hear the twins’ version, so you have to go pick him up.”

Andrew’s reaction is as predictable as heartbreaking. “He can’t!” he hisses. “Nicky!”

Renee cards a hand through his hair as she gently tugs him back into her side. “Chuck is going to bring Aaron straight to the court, Drew,” she says, her tone lite but impossible to be mistaken as anything but an order. “You’ll see him soon and he won’t have to meet Steven.”

Nicky almost asks her not to say that name. He’s been on the edge of throwing up for the past forty hours straight and he really doesn’t want to do it in front of the judge deciding the fate of his family.

Chuck leaves soberly. He tries to meet Andrew’s or Nicky’s eyes, but neither return his gaze. Instead, Renee gets up and helps Andrew to wear his jacket again. He has a pair of sneakers on that Matt hurriedly fetched from Nicky’s apartment, and so is Seth.

Seth has awkwardly shifted closer to Dan and Matt during the hours. Nicky hasn’t heard what they’d been telling, but he guesses it’s an instinctive feeling: Andrew hasn’t been much vocal about Steven, but Seth had called him racist enough times that Nicky can understand the kid’s desire to stick to the other two black people of the group.

Nicky is brown, just like his mother is. Luther had never really liked that, deep down, and Nicky doesn’t know how to be a person of colour, doesn’t know how to be black enough, brown enough, to belong. He’s always been too scared of trying and being told he didn’t belong; he’d had enough of that as the gay kid in church, he wouldn’t have lived through another rejection.

Not enough, not enough, not enough, not Mexican enough, not American enough, not white enough, not brown enough, not man enough, not religious enough, not good, never good enough.

He forces himself to think it’s the best choice in any case: Dan could kick anyone’s ass at any time.
of day, and Matt wouldn’t enjoy it, his heart too big for it, but he’s tall and big and strong and he could fight if his hand was forced. Nicky is no good in a fight.

The surprise is Allison, actually. She’s brought along a thick sweater that fit nothing with the weather and with the logo of a University she hadn’t attended, a bit old, a bit worn out, but that Seth had shrugged on and had been holding on ever since.

Her face is tight under the perfect make up as she puts her bag on the desk and pulls out a beauty case. “Ten minutes to fix that face of yours,” she mutters under her breath. “This might be the most pressure I’ve ever been under.”

Nicky has no doubt of his state, he’s pretty sure the bags under his eyes reach the base of his nose by now, but he forces a grateful smile to his lips. “You lead a multimillionaire company.”

She glares at him, “Exactly.”

A few times Allison went crazy with make-up on Nicky’s face. Lipstick, eyeliner, foundation and eyeshadow, everything. She always managed to make him look otherworldly beautiful, but that’s not what she’s aiming for today and her brushes, though as precise as always, are stiff and empty of her usual gleeful pride that made her look like a young girl, for once. Her cold-hearted bitch attitude stays on the whole time.

“Stand straight,” she orders. “Don’t drop your gaze, look at the judge, don’t look at your parents. Be smart about this, throw them under the bus for every single stunt they pulled on you.” Only a handful of inches from her face, she looks at him with eyes twirling. Knowledge, understanding. “Don’t you dare feel sorry for them.”

Nicky nods.

It’s not like he’s afraid of what might happen to his father when he loses this trial — and he will, because Ichirou made sure of it —, but if he stops to think about this carefully, if he pulls himself out just enough, he could feel bad for his mother, feel sorry for all she’d given up for Luther. Maybe, if he were still sixteen, he’d hate the mere idea of hurting her.

“I won’t,” he promises instead, because he’s grown up now and it’s a child’s duty to take care of their parent.

He’s got kids himself, and he can’t comprehend or excuse what she has allowed to happen to him any longer.

Allison nods, lips thin. Nicky can guess what she’s thinking, I’ve been there, I’ve fought my family as well, I know the pain mixed in with the hatred, but she’s better than any person and she doesn’t. Their pains are different, their backgrounds even more so, and she won’t take the spotlight of his suffering to underline her own.

She pulls back shortly after. “The best I could do,” she says grimly, not sounding too satisfied.

“All right,” Renee offers gently. “The bulk of the convincing will be done by Nicky’s words.”

Only Andrew’s presence kept Nicky from exploding. Crying, laughing maniacally, he doesn’t know how, but he really wanted to burst. Fuck.

Wymack grunted, but he patted Nicky’s arm. “Let’s get this over with. Abby, Kevin and Katelyn won’t forgive me if the twins don’t get home right now.”
Probably, the underwhelming feeling of the whole ordeal was due to the exhaustion of feelings in seeing Aaron for the first time since the hospitalisation. After getting that, his cousin in his arms, crying in his neck that he didn’t do it, he didn’t want it, he was so fucking sorry, what was the sight of his father’s outraged reddened face? It not like he was saying anything Nicky had never heard before from him.

The judge heard Chuck’s side of the story first, agent Higgins’ second, and the twins’ third. Aaron first, Andrew second. The medical records confirmed the non-consensual drugging theory, and Andrew’s clipped recap of Steven’s behaviour in the past day brought Seth over to the stand as well.

Nicky closed his eyes and brought his lips to his entwined fingers as the words filled the courtroom, barely censored of profanities and still shamefully explicit. Seth laid his trauma bare as if yelling at the stormy sea from on top of a cliff. Listen to me, he seemed to say. Listen to what they did to me. Listen!

Judge Rollins, a black woman in her sixties, asked with hard voice if Allison’s lawyers intended to pursue the case of this young man as well. Mrs Perez didn’t turn to her employer as she claimed that they were going to file the new case as soon as this was over, and Nicky realised: they’d talked about it already, they decided on it.

When he turned to meet Allison’s eyes, she refused him.

Seth’s, she met head on. He seemed to deflate just light, with his face coloured a painful shade of earnest surprise.

It was over so fast Nicky’s terror seemed horribly exaggerated compared to the reality of facts. Mrs Perez passed him a note halfway through Luther’s testimony on Nicky’s alleged unreliability. Apparently, the judge they got had solved many cases with denial of custody to strictly-religious family; her own background presented a history of an abusive marriage with a Catholic extremist man.

Nicky went through the motions of his own statement almost in trance. It was all bureaucracy after all, no less staged than a play in a theatre, and Luther seemed to realised it as the judge shut him down more and more.

He was asked, did he realise the danger he’d left his kids exposed to?, and he said yes.

Did your kid call you in the middle of the night for help? He didn’t know who else to call.

Did you go to him? Of course he did, what kind of question was that?!

Judge Rollins held her hand up to stop Luther’s lawyer from objecting. “I’ve heard quite enough.” She shuffled the papers in front of her for a while, head shaking just lightly, but then she placed them down and looked up at her small, tired audience. “There is no doubt in my mind that returning these children to their cousin’s care is the best course of action, for their safety above all.”

Nicky hears Aaron’s strangled gasp, unsure, disbelieving, and then Renee’s voice, ever so gentle, soothing both of the twins down with barely restrained happiness in her whispers. For himself, he’s not sure. Something is stirring in his throat, but all he can do is fall into old habits: with the corner
of his eye, he spies his father’s reaction waiting trying to gauge the best way to dam it back into something manageable.

What do I say, what do I do, the right answer, what’s the right—

He’s ripped out of that well with his name called in a firm but carefully blunt voice.

When he turns, the judge is looking at him directly. “Mr Hemmick, I need you to hear something. This room—“ she gestures vaguely to the court, somber, “—has rarely ever seen accidents. When I get dragged out of bed in the middle of the night for a hearing, usually, it’s because a child died, and it was for the voluntary actions of someone who, in most cases, should have protected them. When i walked in here today, I had expectations of what I was going to hear. I am extremely glad to find I was wrong.”

He wants to tell her there’s a boy in this room who’s been drugged, one who’s been harassed and one who’s been abused; this is not a happy ending, no matter how much worse she’s seen. He doesn’t; he nods instead.

“This wasn’t your fault,” the judge finishes. “I’m not sure you’ll believe it soon enough, but for once I can say it.” A nod. “Now, you should go home and rest with your family.”

The hammer comes down at some point. Nicky barely registers it, under the noise of his father’s outraged screams.

They don’t turn back. Nicky tucks Aaron to one side and Andrew to the other, Allison holds a protective arm over Seth’s shoulders and their tiny group leaves, goes.

He doesn’t check whether his parents are looking at him, and how.

Maybe he’s finally stopped caring.

Oh, no. He still does.

Wymack passes him a glass with water and lemon juice and watches unflinchingly as he twirls it in his mouth before spitting it into the toilet. He feels like he could puke again any second if he tries to move from the cold tiled floor, but logically he knows he hasn’t eaten enough in the past Lord knows how many hours to have anything else to let out.

“You’re giving those kids quite the scare,” the man says. On top of everything else they’ve been through recently, he keeps to himself, but Nicky hears anyway.

His only answer is a grunt, but he forces himself up to his feet with only a third of success owed to the arm Wymack wraps around his waist. Brushes his teeth, checks his terrifying reflection on the mirror and decides, okay, let’s get out.
Not having the twins in hand-reach is terrifying, anyway.

They’re back home, for as upturned as it still looks from Nicky’s impromptu abandonment, but Andrew and Aaron are in their bedroom while everybody else is speed between the living room, discussing Seth’s upcoming trial, and the kitchen to provide some nutrients to everyone.

Wymack stops in the latter, Nicky just aims for the first.

The twins are both on Andrew’s bed, curled closer with their hands held in a tangle of bone-white fingers. Drew is not talking but Aaron is sobbing his heart out. Their Worry-Eaters keep guard from their laps.

Nicky closes the door behind himself and speed-walks to the mattress. The moment his ass touches the cover, Aaron is buried deep in his chest, trembling and crying but never letting go of his twin’s hands.

It’s easy, and terribly familiar from older days filled with nightmares of Tilda, to gather him in his lap and then gently coax Andrew closer himself.

The fake earring is gone, Nicky notices.

“I can’t—” His voice is a raven’s croak. “I can’t lose you guys. I couldn’t let it happen even if it were the right thing for you, and I’m sorry for that.”

Aaron gulps down mouthfuls of air as he apologises for the world, for everything and nothing, and sometimes he slips, sometimes he says mom and don’t and I’ll be good, and Nicky dies a bit every time but he lets it happen because Aaron needs to let it go. Andrew taps on Nicky’s forearm, a drawn out rhythm where every note is faded scar.

It takes a while for it to register. Nicky wants to chalk it up to tiredness, but maybe his brain just didn’t want to see it.

Andrew still has the jacket on. Never took it off, never let the sleeves get any higher than the line of his knuckles. A slight trembling in his hands.

Nicky keeps an arm firmly on Aaron’s lithe frame, but he gently pries the other out of Andrew’s grip to reach for the sleeves instead.

Just a tug is enough to see them, and the first thought, dumb and irrational and pathetically useless, is that relief-tinged assessment that they are clearly marks made by unexperienced hand. The cuts are crusted in red, but they seem relatively light, probably survival instinct catching up and turning into hesitance. There are so many all over the forearm, but they are too low, easily spottable, which means made without intention of hiding, without method.

It’s the first time, probably.

Still.

Nicky closes his eyes and tries to breath through his nose alone least he throws up again. His heart is pumping so fast.

Aaron cries out louder when he sees. Nicky’s hand snaps up to his nape before he can pull away, and he trashes in the hold. Desperation turns to anger, to pain, to hatred, then slowly to desperation again as his efforts to escape break against Nicky’s hold. “I’m sorry,” he yells in his shirt once again. “I ruined it, I’m sorry!”
Andrew clenches his teeth. “I wanted to go,” he hisses. His voice is cold and hoarse as if the silence he’d hold until now had scratched his throat open, as if he’d been quietly screaming this whole time. “He didn’t even—I wanted to go. I insisted we went and I didn’t even pay attention that—”

“Enough.” There’s another Nicky under his skin. He’s taking over the situation with a gentle hand on the reins but firm grip on his throat. It’s an older, better-adjusted version of him that knows what to do, and Nicky lets the illusion take over for a moment. “Enough.”

He kisses Aaron’s forehead, then brings Andrew in as well and kisses him too. His eyes stare at the wall, but his brain picks apart his past for him to push the planimetry of today on it, looking for matches.

“I’ll call Bee tomorrow morning,” he says, when it becomes clear how far they went back to. “You both should talk to her.” Lower, “Maybe I will too.”

Andrew’s shoulders drop, but in a good way; relaxing rather than giving up, abandoning a crushing weight rather than succumbing to it.

Aaron keeps on crying. Nicky promises in his ear that it’s gonna be alright.

Renee brings them tea a few minutes later, and bandages for Andrew because of course she noticed first. She wraps him up and then tucks all three of them under a quilt. The bed is minuscule, but they somehow make it fits.

Nicky whispers, thank you. She nods solemnly before sliding out of the room, and the three of them are out as lights just a second after.

Bee listens to half of Nicky’s rambling begging on the phone before telling him to come over to her study, now, so they can talk face to face. He sits in with the twins this time, because Aaron refuses to let go of his sleeve and Andrew won’t stop picking at his bandages.

Bee speaks to him first. “Have you felt the urge to do it again?”

Andrew shakes his head without hesitation. “I was—foggy. Aaron was in the hospital, Nicky was alone, the Pig brought me to that place, Steven said to take that faggy shit off my face and—” he stops.

Bee looks at him patiently. “Everything you felt is okay, Andrew. It was a terrible moment. We all deal with circumstances the best way our brains can find.”

Andrew keeps quiet for a bit more, with his eyes darting to Aaron every so often, before he finally speaks again, in a much lower voice. “—my stuff was in a trash bag.”

It’s such a small thing, logically, when compared with everything that went down, but the way he says the words cuts Nicky down in a thousand pieces. Trash, like what Tilda always told her kids were.

“That was an awful thing to do to a kid.”

“I don’t know why I cut myself, I never thought of it before.” Andrew’s hands twitch in his lap.
“It’s just that Steven had left a razor on the sink and my stuff was in a trash bag.”

“Can you tell me if you were thinking of killing yourself, Andrew?”

“No,” he shakes his head. “I just wanted it to hurt.” Bee waits. “It was supposed to hurt. With everything and— But I didn’t hurt. I didn’t feel anything. I should have hurt but I didn’t and I had to.”

Nicky bites his tongue hard. Andrew tilts to the side just enough to fall into him.

Bee nods quietly. “Alright, then.” Nothing is alright, actually, but she turns to Aaron. “And how are you feeling?”

Aaron shrugs. Bee waits for him for three whole endless minutes, but nothing comes out of it.

She looks at Nicky, then. “I think you should also book some hours for yourself,” she opens, without hesitation. “I’m thinking joint therapy for them, but you should follow an individual program at a different moment.”

He knew it already, of course. She’d mentioned on the phone, but even if she didn’t he was smart enough to understand she didn’t want to have him lay out his pain for the twins to see and have them carry it as well as theirs. It would be too much, he knew, so he nodded without hesitation.

When Andrew frowned at him, he forces himself to smile a bit. “There’s more than just tonight that I ought to take care of,” he admits quietly. “Seeing my dad and mom—it hurt me a lot. I need to understand how and why and how to get better.”

“They’re assholes,” Aaron mutters and Nicky hates himself a bit for it but snorts anyway.

Bee smiles at the three of them. “I am a non-judgmental party,” she offered mildly, but Nicky had a feeling where she stood in the privacy of her mind.

Judging by Andrew’s nod, he knew it too.

“So,” Bee said, bring them both to attention. “Shall we find a schedule that works for us? I would suggest a few days to recharge and take a breath, but returning to school, practice and work as soon as possible could help you all to settle back into your routine.”

Nicky had been arranging things around in his head all morning, trying to come up with something that worked, but the first thing out of Andrew’s scrunched up face was, “Kevin’s gonna be annoying.”

“We missed the qualification match for the Little League cup,” Aaron huffed.

The thing was, Nicky couldn’t tell them it was gonna be okay or that Kevin wouldn’t be pissed. Kevin would absolutely be pissed, it was his way of displaying that he cared, which for some reason looked like the most absurdly normal thing to have happened in the past week.

So Nicky laughed, if a bit hysterically, and Aaron sighed and Andrew rolled his eyes and, okay, there were far from alright.

They had to start from somewhere, didn’t they?
DM from Erik Klose:

- You’re welcome? Not sure what I did, but I’m happy I helped!
- Damn, it’s been a while, isn’t it?
- How are you doing, Nicky?

Chapter End Notes

I'm perfectly aware I already set Seth up to be Allison's dead boyfriend but I do not care and also it's the holidays, I can indulge exactly how much I want to.

End Notes

I mark this as complete, but watch out because I might update it when I get in the mood for it.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!