and there are some like us,
just walking, making our feet move ahead of us,
a little bored, a little lost, a little angry,
walking as though we were really going somewhere,
walking as if there was something to see at Adelaide or maybe on King,
something that will give a fair return for this use of shoe-leather,
something that will make us smile with a strange new
happiness, a lost but recovered joy.

- Raymond Souster, “Yonge Street Saturday Night”
So, as a queer person who grew up in rural Canada and had my queer revelations a little later in life than some, I found myself having a lot of feelings about Patrick. This fic is my attempt to write those feelings down. I hope you like it. The fic is finished and I’m going to be posting one chapter per day over six days.

**Warnings/content notes:** Most of the warnings/content notes are in the tags, and are for the entire fic, so not all of them show up in every chapter. I’m happy to give more info or details if you’d like. One content note that was hard to tag for is: this is a story about someone coming to their queer sexuality, coming from a hetero- and cis-normative community, which does mean that sometimes Patrick doesn’t have the right vocabulary or understanding for concepts of sexuality and gender. It also means that he occasionally reflects on homophobic behaviours he’s seen or participated in (all in the past). These sections are very brief. There is one reference to an anti-gay slur, not used against anyone in specific.

**Titles:** The title of the fic, and all the chapter titles, are taken from poems by Raymond Souster. This is because, when I started thinking about Patrick Brewer, I kept remembering a conversation I had about Souster many years ago. I was at the time interested in his poem “Study: The Bath,” which feels like one kind of poem right up until the last line, when it shifts suddenly. The poem had surprised me, in the nicest way. I mentioned it to a friend of mine at work, who agreed about the unexpectedness of the last line of that poem, and gave me his reading of Souster, which has stuck with me for almost twenty years now. He said: Souster worked in a bank his whole life, doing the same job as his father before him. And a lot of his poems are arranged to look like neat little columns of numbers, little sums to be added up. But what happens a lot of the time in his poetry is that the lines don’t add up the way you expect them to; the poem twists, or substitutes one thing for another, often at the end, as if Souster looked at ledgers all day at his bank job and said to himself: surely the world can’t be contained or described so neatly, surely the world doesn’t add up this way. The whole is greater and stranger than the sum of its parts. My friend said: it’s as if he looked at those ledgers and said to himself: there has to be something more to life than this, something that twists away from our expectations and exceeds the mundane. My friend said: Souster wanted, desperately, and for the sake of his own soul, to know what strange and unexpected things lived outside of the confines of those neat little columns of numbers, the order of the world as it was supposed to be.

So, when I started thinking about Patrick, I started thinking about that.

When I actually did the research into Souster’s poetry in depth, for the sake of this project, I found that there’s a lot of his writing that’s misogynist/racist/messed up in various ways. I don’t want to lionize him. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the idea of neat little columns that refuse to stay put. Or, as in Souster’s most famous poem, which Canadian kids read in school and which forms the title of chapter one, the idea of roller-coasters that refuse to stay on the rails.

**Acknowledgements:** Many many thanks to leupagus and livrelibre for their work as my crack team of full-draft betas. They added so much to this fic, I can’t even tell you, helping me to see themes and structures and listening as I wrote my way through. They’re also responsible for making the secondary characters much more present and awesome than they were. Thanks also to eruthros for hearing my every Patrick Thought for months without running away, and for structural help on the draft. Thanks to cantarina for doing a thoughtful, insightful beta reading, and for having United Church feelings with me. Lastly, highfives to: bessyboo and her baseball chat for helping me out with some Important Baseball Facts.
(remaining baseball errors are mine); knitmeapony for patiently explaining how facebook works (same); and kalakirya for telling me hilarious hockey double-entendres. This fic was inspired by two off-handed prompts from sasha_feather on twitter and I doubt she was intending for me to write . . . this, but, here we are!

**Timeline:** It is unsurprisingly difficult to write a complete canon retelling when the Schitt’s Creek timeline is such a mess and basically the whole town exists in some magical land of Always Summer, Occasionally Christmas. I am the Moira Rose *We’ve done the best we can!* gif. Honestly, I tried so hard. I really did. For a while, I did. Eventually I gave up. Come scream about it with me on twitter sometime, I could rant for days.

Enjoy the fic!

See the end of the work for more notes.
Patrick shoves his bags into the trunk of his car, moving as fast as he can, trying to let the simple physical action take up all the space in his head. He wants it to drown out the scene that’s been playing on an endless loop behind his eyes since the night before.

*You always fucking come back. This is no different.*

It doesn’t work. He closes the trunk, hard, almost wishing to break something, the car or, hell, even his hand: to generate some emergency that could distract him more effectively.

He doesn’t manage it. And he isn’t so far gone, yet, that he’s gonna do it on purpose. He’s not that kind of guy, who would break his knuckles punching a wall because he can’t handle his own emotions. He’s more controlled than that. He takes a deep breath, then another, and doesn’t put his fist through the window of his sensible grey Toyota Corolla.

The night before, he broke it off with Rachel. He’s broken it off with Rachel before, lots of times, but not in the last year, and not since they got engaged ten months ago. He has no fucking idea how to make it stick this time around.

* 

Patrick proposed to Rachel in a moonlit park, after a nice dinner in a restaurant way too fancy for them to afford very often. His parents had encouraged him to do it in the restaurant, to make everyone clap and cheer for them, but Patrick couldn’t bear the idea of all those strangers watching him while he tried to get the words out. He told himself it was because it was a private moment between the two of them—Patrick was a private kind of guy, after all—but it was also because he was incredibly, overwhelmingly nervous. Nervous she’d say no, nervous she’d say yes, his emotions were all over the place in the days leading up to it. Rachel had been hinting at the idea of getting engaged over the last couple months, since the last time they’d gotten back together, and he knew, logically, that she’d say yes. But still, Patrick felt like the result of the proposal was completely unpredictable. When he tried to imagine the moments after it, the days and weeks after it, what his life would look like once he was engaged, his mind came up blank.

He was nervous, that was the problem; he was nervous.

So he did it after they left the restaurant, walking Rachel to a nearby park bench, getting down on one knee in the dewy grass and giving her the ring he’d bought a couple of weeks before. It was white gold, her favourite, with a simple small diamond arrangement. It fit her finger perfectly, because he’d surreptitiously measured her other rings, and it was conflict-free, because that was the kind of thing they both cared about.

“It’s beautiful!” she cried, when she saw it. “Dude, yes, I would totally love to marry you!”

He laughed, because it was a perfectly Rachel thing to say, and he loved her in that moment. They hugged, and then they kissed, and they held hands on their way out of the park.

Rachel was so happy, grinning and bouncing, that Patrick felt happy too, like maybe the long years of messy breakups could finally be behind them. It was a relief, really, to have finally made this decision; what he was feeling was relief.
He made himself a promise, right then, to do right by her this time, and felt his resolve harden in his chest. Rachel had been his friend for longer than anyone, longer than they’d been dating. He owed her better than what he’d done in the past. He’d called it off with her so many times that it had become a running joke among their families and friends: *You two break up yet today?* Patrick’s friend Mike had said to them once. He could tell that Rachel didn’t like that; she flushed behind her freckles and shut down when people brought up their storied history. He hated that she felt embarrassed about it, and at the same time felt embarrassed himself, that he couldn’t commit to her. When he thought about another ten years like the last ten years, stringing her along six months at a time, dating other women in between, always giving up and going back to her, he felt sick. He felt angry. He needed something different.

So he did what his dad and mom and cousins and friends had been telling him to do for years now: he proposed. And when he saw the look in Rachel’s eyes, that joy and relief, he’d felt joy and relief too, like he’d finally made the right choice.

And it kept feeling that way for a little while. Or else, he’d held it together for a while, trying to think his way through it: she was a good person, and funny, and sweet, and he cared about her. It all added up, it all made perfect sense. They had tons of stuff in common; they knew how to talk to each other, when to tease and when to comfort; they’d seen each other through illnesses and dying family members and university and shitty jobs; they shared favourite tv shows and bands; and Patrick felt more comfortable with her sexually than with anyone else in his life, even though he’d never really been a very sexual person.

But eventually, even if he could convince himself of all that in the daytime, the nights got worse: at night he felt a deep sense of unease, a creeping despair that came over him while he lay awake in the darkness, Rachel’s sleeping body pressed against his, and his thoughts began to swarm. *What if she gets pregnant. What if she wants to buy a house. What if my parents offer to help us buy a house.* Thoughts that would make other people happy, thoughts that should make him happy, just made him feel dread. He lived in fear of those milestones, and he knew that wasn’t right, but he argued himself down, every time. He was just nervous. He was a commitment-phobe, he had trust issues to work on; he could be kind of an asshole, and he knew it. He and Rachel were perfect for each other. Everyone said so. He needed to get over it. He needed to be a better person.

When they saw each other, a few times a week, he tried to be a good fiancé: he cooked them dinner, joked around, brought her little gifts—holiday-themed socks, habanero peppers, things he knew she’d like. He talked to her mom on the phone when she was fed up with talking to her mom on the phone; he watched TV shows she liked and he didn’t; he went down on her, and worked hard to come when she returned the favour.

He told himself he’d feel better after the wedding, when things were more settled. And when he was less tired. He found he was always tired, since the proposal, coming home after work and just collapsing on the couch, zoning out in front of the TV. Friends would invite him over for dinner or board games, or invite him out for some pick-up baseball or a movie, but he never seemed to have the energy, anymore. He went to work, and he paid the attention to Rachel that he owed her, and that seemed to be as much as he could manage.

He went to the doctor about it. They tested him for Lyme. Other things, too. The tests all came back fine, and the doctor shrugged.

“What have you considered seeing a therapist?”

Patrick shook his head. His life was full; all the pieces were in place; he had no reason to be unhappy. Other people should get therapy. It was a good thing for people to do, in general. Everyone
should feel free to go to therapy and really there was too much social stigma against it, but Patrick himself had no reason to go.

So he went on feeling tired. Maybe it was just how people felt in their thirties.

“You should play me something,” Rachel said, one night, when they were reading next to each other on Patrick’s couch. “You haven’t played me a song in forever.”

Patrick blinked in surprise. He hadn’t even thought about his guitar in weeks. Months, maybe. It occurred to him that he used to play all the time.

“Yeah, I’m really out of practice, babe,” he said.

She shrugged. “So get back in practice. I don’t mind if you’re rusty.”

It was eminently practical, just like she always was. It was one of the things they had in common, that made them such a good fit. So he dug his guitar out of the closet and dusted it off, tuning it quickly.

He tried a bunch of bits of songs, fiddling around, flitting from one to the other, indecisive. Then he played a few in earnest, just the ones that came to him off the top of his head. Nothing he’d written, just some stuff he remembered the chords for. He didn’t sound too bad, he thought.

“Jesus,” Rachel said, after the fourth or fifth one. “You know I love the sad ones, and I love the way you sing them, but just once can you play something happy?”

That’s when Patrick realized that his fingers hadn’t found a major key all night. He put his guitar back in his closet and closed the door.

“I’m sorry,” Rachel said, when he came back to sit next to her. Her eyes were anxious, worried she’d hurt him. “I’m sorry. You can play what you feel like. I’ll listen to sad songs all night if you want.”

“No, it’s okay. Just not in a good mood today, I guess.”

She frowned at him, and rubbed his back. “Anything I can help with? You wanna talk about it?”

“No,” Patrick said, because he couldn’t even imagine where to start to articulate the feeling in his chest, heavy and empty at the same time. “It’s okay. Thanks for being here.”

She kissed him, because she loved him, and wanted him to know it. He kissed her back, for the same reason.

*

When everyone in their lives started talking about wedding planning, about venues and colours and flowers, it all got worse. The dread in his chest expanded. He panicked. Rachel told him she’d picked out a dress already, because she’d found something gorgeous on sale, so he went in to get fitted for a suit. His dad went with him, smiling and telling him how happy he’d be when he wore this jacket to marry Rachel, and Patrick couldn’t catch his breath for a minute.

It was too real. This jacket: this was the jacket he’d wear to marry Rachel. He’d look like this, and feel like this, on the day they got married.

“I can’t help but notice you two haven’t set a date yet,” his dad went on, idly poking at the racks of
suits in the shop. “Venues need to be booked early, son.”

“I know,” Patrick said, because he did know that, he’d done all the research and knew all the steps. He’d hoped that doing all the research would make him less anxious, or more decisive.

“Are you thinking spring? Because spring of next year is a long time away. You could probably still book some things around here for late summer or fall. This October? I bet George would give you a discount to rent the legion hall.”

It felt like being asked to set a countdown clock for his own execution.

Patrick sat down heavily on the little bench. He didn’t feel he could keep standing up. Where was the tailor? He said he’d just be out of the room for a second.

“October could be nice,” he said. “Not so hot.”

“So long as it doesn’t start snowing early,” his dad agreed.

“Well, global climate change,” Patrick said. His dad nodded.

There was an image behind his eyes, then, of a giant red ticking timer, numbers counting down. Patrick realized, in that moment, that he’d seen it before, that it’d been playing in the back of his mind for weeks. His hand tightened on the knee of the suit pants, and he forced himself to relax again, to let go. He’d wrinkle the material.

The tailor came back in, and Patrick swallowed and stood up and managed a smile, but he couldn’t shake that image, the red numbers ticking down towards inevitability, and he had to admit to himself that it wasn’t normal, it wasn’t a normal way to feel, even for a commitment-phobe, even for an asshole like him.

He got through the rest of the fitting, making small talk with his dad and the tailor, joking about formal wear: oh, we can never look as good as the ladies of course, oh, but they deserve this special day, don’t they, oh, what we go through for them, oh, the old ball and chain, ha ha, but we love them really. Nothing Patrick hadn’t heard before.

Later, alone in his apartment, he panicked, pacing, squeezing and kneading his hands together, sweating, until he finally managed to sit himself down and breathe for a few minutes.

He was crying, had been crying for a while. He was scared, and had been scared for months. He felt it, then, all at once.

The idea of calling off the engagement was ridiculous and terrifying. He could barely even approach the thought of it in his mind without feeling nauseated. It was literally unthinkable. No one in his life would accept it, or if they did accept it, they’d never respect him again. He could imagine the kind of gossip that would fly around town about it: oh, did you hear, Patrick fucked up again, could imagine people shaking their heads over it, making jokes. And how could he do that to Rachel? After all he’d put her through? He’d hate himself. Surely he wasn’t that much of a dick.

But even more terrifying was the increasingly clear picture of what his life would be like if he didn’t. He imagined himself in the future, miserable, always as miserable as he felt now, every day, for the rest of his life, only ever playing sad songs on the guitar. He imagined himself miserable with kids, miserable doing the same work day in and day out, for his whole life. He imagined feeling this tired, too, for the rest of his life, imagined it getting worse, year after year, until he couldn’t take it anymore. He was coldly terrified of where that story might end.
He had to end the relationship now, instead, for good this time. If he couldn’t keep his promise, if he
couldn’t make himself be happy, then he had to call it off forever.

The problem was, he’d called it off forever at least three times before. He thought Rachel had, too, at
least once. Some of their breakups had been more amicable, or more wistful, but there had definitely
been a bunch of forevers in there.

Maybe that was why it took him two weeks to get up the courage to do it. His suit arrived from the
tailor’s, neat and expensive, wrapped in plastic. He hung it in the closet. He thought about how it’d
be a waste not to use it, and he thought about the sunk cost fallacy.

His entire life was a sunk cost fallacy.

He saw Rachel; he laughed with her; he kept trying, God, he kept trying even after he knew he
couldn’t do it. Even after he knew he was going to call it off. He thought about it while they ate
together, while they did the dishes, while they talked about Rachel’s asshole boss, while they fucked:
he thought about how he was going to call it off. He was pretty sure that made him even more of an
asshole, but every time he tried to find the words, tried to tell her, he choked.

One Thursday, he came home early from work to find Rachel in his apartment, which wasn’t strange
considering she had a key and spent a lot of time there. What was a little more unusual was that his
mom was there, too. There were magazine clippings all over the table, and Rachel’s computer was
open to some kind of wedding website, displaying bridesmaid dresses and decorations. There was a
picture of a man and a woman, impossibly beautiful and happy, heads bent together as they
exchange rings.

They’re actors, Patrick thought, wildly. It didn’t mean anything.

“Oh, Patrick!” his mom said. “You’re home early.”

Patrick was, in fact, home early; Colin had left for an afternoon meeting and Patrick had taken his
chance to skip out on a couple of hours of work when the boss wouldn’t notice. He’d told himself he
could get caught up tomorrow; he was just so tired, today.

Rachel stood up and kissed Patrick quickly on the mouth. “We were trying to figure out colour
schemes. Your suit is grey, right?”

Yeah,” Patrick said. “I can get a tie and pocket square in the right colour once we decide on it.” He
was going to break up with her, though; he would never buy that tie or that pocket square. He was
lying.

All at once he was taken over by a wave of deep, powerful anger: anger at Rachel and his mom, for
doing all this work that was going to be useless; anger at himself for being too much of a coward to
tell her, to stop them from doing it; anger at the tailor, who had sent along a nice note about his
special day along with the suit; anger at the entire situation. He felt an urge to scream, to sweep all
the wedding preparation stuff to the ground, to pick up the sensible Acer Chromebook that Rachel
got on sale and break it in half. He felt an urge to cry, and his throat started to close up in
anticipation.

“Good. Your mom likes gold and hot pink.”

Patrick’s mom laughed. “I was joking!” she protested.

“I don’t think we’re going to do gold and hot pink,” Patrick said, smiling at his mother. “Or, in fact,
trusting any of your decisions anymore.” His heart was racing; his mind felt full and slow, stuffed
with cotton. He just wanted the conversation to be over.

His mom rolled her eyes at him. “Well, whatever you settle on, the important thing is just that you’re getting married. Don’t let all these little decisions make you lose sight of that.”

“Yeah,” Patrick said, barely getting the word out.

“You’re right, Marcy,” Rachel agreed. “That’s good advice.”

“Well. I guess I had better get going, let you two fight it out in peace.” She picked up her handbag and grabbed her coat off the rack by the door.

Patrick and Rachel both gave her a hug, Rachel for a little longer, because Rachel really loved his mom, and his mom really loved her. It was another thing that Patrick had to take away from her. From both of them, really. He wanted to be sick.

Once his mom was out the door, Rachel turned to him, hands in her jeans pockets, smiling. “You wanna go out for dinner, since you’re home so early?”

Patrick looked at all the magazines spread across the table; probably stuff his mother had found at yard sales or stolen from the hair salon. Probably stuff she had been saving for months, or for years. Patrick was her only child, and so he was the only location for her to pin all of her hopes and dreams.

His mom had asked him, weeks ago, if he wanted to give Rachel his grandmother’s wedding band. He still hadn’t gotten back to her with an answer.

He looked at Rachel’s soft, smiling face, at Rachel who had loved him and supported him for years, even when he left her hanging, even when he broke up with her over and over, or worse, when he got sullen and withdrawn and forced her to do it first. She had given up years of her life for him.

“I want to break up,” Patrick said, all in a rush, and it felt like vomiting, that same horrible disgusting out-of-control feeling. Rachel’s eyes widened, just for a second, and then narrowed.

“That’s funny,” she said, in a flat voice. She looked down at the table. Maybe she was thinking the same thoughts Patrick was, about his mom, about how disappointed his mom was going to be.

“I mean it,” Patrick said.

She brushed past him, picking up her glass and filling it at the sink. With her back to him, she said, “I know we’ve been through some shit, Patrick, but you can’t—can’t joke around about it, not anymore, it’s not okay.” She took a drink.

When she turned back around, he tried again. “I’m not joking. I walked in here and I saw all this—” he gestured at the table—“and I don’t want it, Rach. I can’t do it.”

There was a certain euphoria in saying it, a sense of relief. Whatever good feeling he had, though, was shattered when he noticed that she was crying.

“Don’t want a wedding? Or don’t want me?”

He couldn’t bring himself to say I don’t want you, not even then, not even when it was true. So he said, “I want to break up,” again.

That was when, in a cold voice and with hot tears slipping down her cheeks, she asked him why.

That was the question, wasn’t it. Patrick didn’t know the answer, not really. He just knew he
couldn’t go through with it. He tried to explain it to her anyway, tried to explain why he wouldn’t want to marry a beautiful, funny, kind person who loved him and knew everything about him, why he wouldn’t want to spend his life with someone loyal and good, someone who had been his friend for so long. They worked, together: on paper, at least, they worked perfectly. He can’t find the flaw in that calculation but he knows there is one, knows there must be one, somewhere: he feels it.

“I don’t see how it can ever work between us,” he said. “I’m not—I’m so sorry, Rach. But I’m not happy. I’m miserable. I try to make it work, but nothing—nothing I do makes it work.” This with frustration. There was still a part of him insisting that he try to fix it. That he could fix it, if he tried harder. He pushed that part away.

Rachel laughed bitterly, wiping a tear away.

“Yo’ll come back,” she said, her voice an accusation, choked with snot because she always got snotty when she cried. If he weren’t the source of it, he’d get her a tissue. “You always fucking come back. This is no different.”

“No,” Patrick said, wishing, hoping that he was right, “no, I won’t, it’s for good. I can’t. I can’t anymore. I’m sorry, I’m so fucking sorry—” and that was when he started crying, and when she yelled at him, told him to stop it, that she couldn’t fucking stand it if he was going to cry, that she couldn’t fucking stand it if he chose to do this to them and then thought he got to cry about it. She was right; he was a piece of shit; he didn’t deserve to cry at all, much less in front of her. He did, though, he kept crying after she left his place, kept crying on and off for the rest of the day, until finally, in his bed very late at night, he fell into fitful doze. His last, bitter thought before sleep was: at least that’s over.

But in the cold light of day the next morning, he heard her words again, and started to worry that she was right. That’s what had always happened before, after all. The terror he’d been feeling, inching up on him over the months, surged again inside him, clenching his stomach and filling his brain with noise.

What would his mom say. What would his dad say. What would Rachel’s mom say. What would everyone at work say. He tried to imagine those conversations, tried to imagine himself navigating his way through them, each one more painful than the last. He tried to imagine continuing his life here.

He looked around his apartment. Over the last ten months, Rachel had suggested a few times that they move in together. He’d resisted the idea, saying that he wanted to keep their spaces separate until the wedding. The plan had been for Rachel to move in here, after, and then to look for bigger space together when they could. The place wasn’t bad—Patrick kept it clean and tidy, filled with simple, practical furniture that Rachel had helped him pick out, that they had both agreed on in the store based on price and utility. He’d move some of his sports memorabilia and 4-H trophies to make room for hers, right next to them; they’d get another bookshelf to put her sci-fi and romance in next to his nonfiction. She already had drawers in the dresser, and Patrick already kept her favourite foods in the kitchen, and there were already photos of them together on the wall. Their life together was already written into this space, ready and waiting for them to fill it. An expectation for the shape that Patrick should mold himself into.

He felt like he couldn’t breathe, like all that stuff was a weight pushing on his chest. And he knew, he knew, that he couldn’t stay there.

The decision came to him suddenly, his thoughts coalescing into a single impulse, the emotion, the desire, overwhelming his logical objections. Before he could start arguing with himself, he had his big duffel bag on the bed and was filling it with his clothes.
He wasn’t going to let himself go back again. He couldn’t. He couldn’t do that to either of them.

* 

He packs the car up tight, until the only remaining empty space is the driver’s seat and enough of the back window to see out of. He goes back up to the apartment one last time. He hadn’t packed any kitchen stuff, or linens, or half of his clothes. He’ll ask his landlady to donate it all for him. He took all the personal items, though, and a lot of his books.

Looking over what’s left behind, he sees the useless remnants of his own life over the last ten years. He sees time wasted. There’s nothing here he can’t do without.

He almost leaves the pictures on the walls, then relents, and packs them up in a box with the rest of Rachel’s stuff. He’ll drop it at her apartment while she’s at work. On his way out of town. Along with his key to her apartment.

He walks downstairs, out his door, turns around, and knocks on his landlady’s door.

“I’m breaking my lease,” he says, when she opens it.

* 

Patrick thinks about stopping to tell his mom and dad that he’s leaving town. Their house isn’t far away from his place. Or from Rachel’s place, for that matter, or from his aunt and uncle’s place, or from his job, or from Rachel’s job. The three square miles of his entire existence.

He knows what his dad will say: You’ve got a good life here, Patrick, and a good woman who loves you. He knows what his mom will say: Honey, we just want you to be happy. Can you at least tell us why you’re so unhappy? Let us help. He knows because they’ve said it to him half a dozen times before. And they’ve always been right, and reasonable, and he’s never been able to explain it. He still can’t explain it, but he knows, deep down, that he needs to change. He needs to change . . . something. Maybe everything.

But as clear as that is to him, he also knows that there are all kinds of people around here who can talk him out of it. They’ve done it before. He’s let them do it before.

You’ll come back. This is no different.

He texts his parents instead of going over there or calling, and he feels like a coward, and he feels something else, too. Brave, maybe. Steady, dependable Patrick: it’s not like him to do something like this. Maybe that’s why he has to do it, he thinks. Make the illogical choice. Do the thing that doesn’t add up.

Last of all, he emails his boss.

A couple months back, he’d called in sick every day for a week, telling himself each morning that he was going to take the time to apply for new jobs, to find something more exciting and challenging than creating financial plans for subsidiaries of corporate clients. Telling himself that was the change he needed. Then he’d spent the week on the couch, not doing very much of anything, helplessly watching the hours roll past him. The following Monday, he’d gone back to work, and quietly accepted well-wishes for the terrible flu he’d had.

He could ask Colin for leave. He could say all kinds of things: medical emergency, death in the family. That would be the safer route. It’s a good job. Steady. Good money. He’s been working himself up the ladder, and would probably be due for a promotion soon.
Patrick writes the words *accept my resignation effective immediately* and sends the email off.

When he can’t think of any more bridges to burn, he gets in the car and starts driving. He hopes to God it’s enough.

Rachel’s voice still rings in his head: *This is no different.*

* 

Ten hours later, driving through the dark, he sees a sign for a town called Schitt’s Creek. He laughs to himself, and if it sounds hysterical, well, he’s the only one in the car to hear it.

He pulls off the highway.

* 

There’s an old run-down motel in town, but it’s after midnight and the front office is locked and dark. Patrick knocks anyway, just in case, but no one comes to the door. He sighs and considers getting back on the road—hilariously appropriate name aside, he might as well find a town that has a Super 8—but his eyes are fuzzy with the long day of driving and he can’t bear the idea of starting back up again. It’s a surprisingly warm night, for early spring; he covers himself with a pile of coats from the back seat, and sleeps in his car.

* 

When he wakes up, he’s freezing, and his phone is buzzing; he realizes after a few seconds that it’s been buzzing for a while. He glances at the screen: texts from his dad, his mom, his cousins, from Brad at work, and from Rachel: lots and lots of texts from Rachel.

Patrick reads them all. They all say the same things they always say. Then he puts his phone down in his lap and breathes and breathes. When that stops working, he cries for a while. When that stops working, he looks up real estate agents in Schitt’s Creek, Ontario.

He’ll find a place to stay. He’ll find a job, something to fill in the time and pay the bills so he doesn’t have to dig too much into his savings. And literally no one in this town will know a single thing about him. That thought on its own is so deeply appealing that he finds himself thinking it over and over: no one will know him, no one will expect anything of him, no one will ask him to explain himself. The relief that courses through him as he thinks those thoughts is like fresh air, like a sudden clean gale of wind through a finally opened window.

He texts his mom back. *I’m fine. Gonna be out of town for a while, figuring things out. Love to everyone.*

He texts Rachel, too, because he owes it to her: *I’m sorry. I can’t anymore. You deserve better than me. It’s over.*

Wiping his face, he starts the car.

* 

Patrick walks into Ray Butani’s house-slash-office-slash-studio at ten in the morning, looking for a lead on an apartment.

“So, Patrick, there are some really lovely bachelor apartments around town that I would love to show you to. Or are we looking for something larger?”
“Something small,” Patrick says. “I’m not sure how long I’m going to be staying.” It might be better, in fact, to go back and get a room at that little motel he saw; what if he wanted to move on after a few days or a couple weeks?

“Well, there isn’t a property owner alive who doesn’t love to hear that!” Ray laughs good-naturedly, but Patrick frowns. Now that he thinks about it, he hasn’t really positioned himself well here. He’s always had a plan in his life, before, always had the steps laid out in front of him. But now he’s at the end of the line: he hasn’t showered, has no job, and has no idea where he’s going to spend the night.

“So, what do you do, Patrick?” Ray asks.

Patrick doesn’t actually know what he does anymore, so he settles on describing his old job. “I’m a . . . financial manager. But I’m traveling. Just, you know. Been traveling around. Looking for work.”

“An itinerant financial manager, right,” Ray says. Patrick’s only known the man for half an hour, but he’s already pretty sure that things are going badly when Ray doesn’t sound cheerful anymore.

“I have savings, I could show you a bank statement,” Patrick says.

“Okay! And perhaps your previous landlord would give you a reference?”

“I kind of . . . broke my lease,” Patrick admits.

“Uh-huh.” Ray appears to consider for a moment, and then his smile blooms on his face again. “Patrick, it occurs to me that I have a room to let here in this house. It’s not big, and you’d be sharing the kitchen and bathroom, but it is something I’d be happy to rent out on a month-to-month basis. With your last month’s rent deposit, of course.”

“Really?” Patrick asks. He hates how desperate he sounds. He should have been able to figure this out on his own, but he’d needed so badly to leave, and it had seemed like the only option at the time, to get as far away as possible.

“Sure. Let me show it to you. You know, I’d also be happy to lease you some office space here if you were interested in setting up shop. I do know a lot of people around town who could use advice on financial affairs.”

“I would think that my use of the common household space for my own small business wouldn’t require any additional payment,” Patrick points out, standing up with Ray. Ray waggles a finger at him.

“Very astute, Patrick, I can see that you must be a good financial manager. Perhaps I’ll hire you myself.”

Two hours after he walked in, Patrick walks out again, with a room, a sort-of job, and what feels like a new best friend; Ray is chatty and kind and, apparently, taking him out for lunch.

“You’ll have to go to the café eventually,” Ray says, walking there with him. It’s pretty far from his house to the centre of town, which is to say, about ten blocks; there really isn’t that much town here to speak of. “Everyone does.”

“Any other places to eat around here?” Patrick asks, to make conversation. Ray tells him about the pizza place on the highway just outside of town, the co-op grocery store that sometimes has ready-made stuff, and then launches into a confusing litany about Chinese food places that leaves Patrick unsure about whether there is one in town or whether there just used to be one. Old Mr Chen died, heart attack, tragic, and his son took over the business, and his son was involved in a really messy
breakup with people named Linda and Heather, that much Patrick’s sure of, but whether the restaurant soldiers on or not is a mystery.

He smiles to himself, during this story; he kind of likes Ray. Certainly he can hold up a conversation, even when his partner in the endeavour maybe isn’t pulling his own weight.

“So, Patrick, where are you from?” Ray asks, as they finally reach the café and get settled in a booth. There aren’t that many other people here: a few men in plaid and trucker hats seated at the counter, nursing coffees and talking to each other in sporadic three- and four-word sentences; two women seated at a table together, one laughing out loud, the other smiling softly; a older guy with startling black eyebrows sitting in a booth with a woman much younger than he is: his daughter, maybe.

“About eight hours west,” Patrick replies, noncommittally. “Small town.”

“So? My family’s from Winnipeg, so I make that drive a couple of times a year. Where is it exactly?”

“Near Kenora,” Patrick says. For some reason he doesn’t want to even say the name of his hometown, doesn’t want to speak it here. He wants that clean-air feeling from last night, the feeling that no one here has to know anything about him.

“Well, we know it’s a small town when Kenora is the reference point,” Ray smiles, letting him off the hook. Patrick feels a little relief roll through him. “What made you stop here?”

That’s a little easier. “I was tired of driving, honestly. It’d been a long day. And the sign made me laugh.”

Ray smiles. “I’ll have to tell Roland— that’s our mayor—I’ll have to tell him that; he loves our town sign. You know, Patrick, back when I first came here, I stopped because of the sign, too.”

Sipping his tea, Patrick asks, “What made you leave Winnipeg?”

Shaking his head, Ray says, “I was a much younger man, and it was a different time. I didn’t think there was a life for me there. Well. You know how it is, being a young man yourself! You want to reject everything your parents planned for you. Now that I’m older, though, it just means I have to drive a long way to get to family reunions!”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. He thinks this over. He’s in his thirties, which is a little late to be rebelling, but on the other hand, he never did it when he was seventeen. “You must miss your family a lot, being so far away.”

Ray shrugs. “I have my life here.”

They eat really indifferent sandwiches with mostly edible fries, and Ray asks him more questions about himself. Patrick doesn’t lie, but he doesn’t mention Rachel, or his weird sudden exit from the town where he’d grown up and lived his whole life, though it must be obvious to Ray that something unusual happened for him to wash up in this town with no job and nowhere to stay. Ray seems to notice his hesitance to talk about it, after a while, and starts talking about himself instead, about the town, giving Patrick gossip on everyone in the café.

“And over in the booth is Johnny Rose and his daughter, Alexis,” Ray says, gesturing with his head. “Of the Rose family. Quite an intriguing local story.”

“Wait, like, Rose Video?” Patrick asks, surprised. He worked at a Rose Video in high school; now that he thinks about it, he recognizes Mr Rose from promotional materials. “I read about that. Their
business manager stole everything and ran, right?"

“Mmm, yes, quite a sad story. I suppose it’s why people aren’t keen to trust people in your line of work, Patrick. Money men.”

Patrick frowns. “I would never steal a client’s money and run away,” he says.

“Right, right,” Ray agrees. “Well, we’ve just met, but I’ll assume you’re not a thief.” His eyes dart over Patrick’s face, as if what he’s not saying is: you do seem to have run away, though.

Patrick purses his lips and doesn’t answer, doesn’t mention the crushing unhappiness he’s lived with for years, or the confusing, pervasive feeling that he had to escape from what seemed like the perfect life. He tells himself: he can try being a new person, a person who doesn’t have that weighing them down. He can see what kind of person he might be, without that.

He clears his throat. “How’d they end up here?”

Ray shrugs. “Schitt’s Creek seems to be a place where people end up when they don’t have anywhere else to go.”

There’s a logical explanation for it, actually, and Ray tells him that too, about the deed to the town and the lack of buyers, but Patrick finds himself coming back to the symbolic explanation instead: that this town, somehow, has some attraction for people who are lost.

* Ray is solicitous as a landlord and roommate, helping Patrick get his stuff moved into the house, making room for him in the fridge and on the shoe rack in the front room, and coming around Patrick’s door to chat with him each evening, talking about his day and mostly not asking questions, mostly letting Patrick listen. To his surprise, it’s just what he needs, someone to keep him company without applying any pressure to talk about himself, and Patrick’s grateful for it. It takes him a few days of watching clients and friends and acquaintances shuffle through the front office to realize that he’s nothing special, that Ray’s just that friendly and outgoing with everyone, but even so, it’s nice to have someone to talk to. He learns that Ray’s unfailingly upbeat, but perceptive at the same time, and has a particular way of seeing through people while bulldozing his way right through a conversation. He’s energetic, and particular, and everyone knows him, and he likes his photography business best of all, even though—as Patrick sees when he looks at his books for him—it’s by far the least profitable.

By focusing exclusively on real estate and travel, Ray could make a lot more money, but it’s clear that he loves being behind the camera. In his old life, Patrick might’ve told Ray this, told him he’d be better off giving up the picture-taking, but Ray’s the person who’s taken him in, and Patrick can’t bear to tell him his dreams are a bad idea.

On his off-time, Ray even helps Patrick find a used desk, and they put together a little office for him in the front room, next to what Ray lovingly calls his photography studio. It’s makeshift, but it’ll do, at least until he’s more on his feet.

About a week after he moves in, Patrick’s lying on his bed, looking at his phone, when Ray opens his door and sticks his head into the room. It’s far from the first time he’s done that, and Patrick thinks it’s good he’s single, and that he’s never had that much libido to begin with, or Ray’s presence might be less amusing and more annoying or embarrassing. As it is, Patrick mostly finds it funny.

“Patrick! Some friends and I are going bowling this evening. Would you like to join us? It will be an
absolute blast, guaranteed.” He makes a definitive slicing motion with his hand on guaranteed, which is hard to argue with.

His phone is full of texts from his family, and social media posts from people who are much happier than he is, and his own Facebook account, which now says Relationship Status: Single, but still lists his location as what it was a week and a half ago. He’s been trying to get himself to update it for the last twenty minutes, then failing, then scrolling through the other, happier peoples’ posts instead.

“There’s a bowling alley here?”

“Bowling alley, curling rink, a couple of baseball fields and soccer fields,” Ray replies. “I hope you don’t mind, Patrick, but I couldn’t help noticing the sports-related memorabilia and the baseball bat and whatnot in your things when we moved you in, and I thought, what better occasion to induce Patrick to come out on the town?”

“I . . . don’t mind,” Patrick says. “That’s really nice.” It is, actually. It’s thoughtful. In his old life, Patrick never liked going bowling. It was loud, and it was sort of a sport but also sort of not, so you couldn’t lose yourself in the rush of it, like in hockey or lacrosse, and it wasn’t much of a team sport, either, so the feeling Patrick liked best in baseball, of working together to common purpose, of being in perfect synch with your teammates, was absent too. It was an activity with lots of talking and drunk people, and very little action: like curling, but without the fun parts. In his old life, no one ever asked Patrick to go bowling because they all knew he didn’t like it.

“So you’ll come with us?” Ray smiles a little wider.

Here in Schitt’s Creek, no one knows that. Ray doesn’t know that. And, what the hell: maybe New Patrick could be a person who likes bowling. He could be anyone, after all. He decides to try saying yes to things like this, to experimenting with things like this, while he makes himself over in this new town.

“I’d love to, Ray,” he says, after a pause. “But I’ll warn you, I’m not very good.”

“It’s mostly an excuse to gossip and see friends, anyway,” Ray enthuses. In his old life, Patrick had also disliked gossip; it’d always made him afraid of what people might be saying about him. But the only things people could say about him here are that he’s a mysterious stranger with a business degree.

“Sounds fun,” he says.

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As he pulls up to the bowling alley, he feels some trepidation. He hasn’t hung out with people he doesn’t already know in a long, long time. Thinking back on it, he hasn’t really hung out with people he does know in a long time, either, other than Rachel and his parents. But he sees Ray as soon as he gets inside, standing with a group of people, so he takes a breath, wipes his palms on his jeans, and goes over to them. Ray introduces him around.

“Nice to meet you all,” Patrick says, shaking hands, trying to remember names: Jeff and his wife Emily, and Ronnie and her wife Karen, who he’d seen in the café the first time he went. While he’s repeating their names to himself in his mind, Ronnie’s looking him up and down.

“So you’re Ray’s date for the night,” she says. “I hope you’re ready to play.”

Patrick smiles, trying to deflect. “Uh, well, I’m not that good at bowling. And I’m just Ray’s friend. And I think we’re only here to have a good time?”
“Attitude like that’ll get you crushed,” Ronnie says, deadpan, and Patrick can’t help his sudden smile; he feels a stirring of competitive spirit, even if it is for bowling.

“Yeah, we’ll see who gets crushed,” he replies, and Ronnie laughs.

“I like this one, Ray,” she calls out to Ray, who’s made his way over to the shoes.

“Thank you, I like him too!” Ray calls back.

“We’re just friends,” Patrick says again, quickly, a little louder this time. Ronnie doesn’t seem to notice or acknowledge him.

Bowling is, actually, fun. Patrick’s more surprised than anyone. Part of it is the company: Ray could turn a state funeral into an evening of light entertainment, and everyone else is funny and quick, too. Patrick finds himself making jokes along with them, getting into the rhythm of their banter. He gets along with Ronnie in particular, who trash-talks him every time he picks up a bowling ball, and Jeff, who trash-talks Ronnie with equal vigour and winks at Patrick every time he does it. Patrick finds himself smiling more often than not.

“You’re gonna try to pick up that spare?” he calls out to Ronnie, who’s looking at a 3-7 split. “Probably better off playing it safe.” He feels a little thrill when she turns to him and raises one calm eyebrow.

“Watch and learn.”

She picks up the spare, and Jeff laughs. “Don’t see you making that shot, new guy,” he says.

“All right, all right,” Patrick grouses. He can’t remember the last time he enjoyed himself this much.

Ray definitely plays for fun, not noticing or caring about the competition between Ronnie, Patrick, and Jeff, but he’s also very good at it, and with Patrick’s meager contributions they manage to keep the game pretty neck and neck. Karen and Emily, meanwhile, are drinking what look like margaritas, chatting about Karen’s gravel business, and casually racking up mostly strikes and spares whenever one of the others reminds them it’s their turn.

“You really should try one,” Karen says, holding up her margarita. “Best in town.”

“At the bowling alley? That’s . . . pretty depressing,” Patrick says. Karen grins at him.

“Gotta find it where you can,” she says.

Patrick decides that he could use a drink, and heads over to the bar, intending to get a beer, like he usually does. It occurs to him, then, that New Patrick could drink anything he likes, that he doesn’t have to drink the same brand of beer he used to buy at the store out of habit. The margaritas had looked good, so he orders one. The guy tending bar doesn’t look at him twice or give him shit for it, just serves up his drink in its spindly glass with its colourful little paper umbrella and takes his money.

The margarita is pretty good. Karen clinks plastic glasses with him and tells him that, if he’s looking, she knows some local entrepreneurs who could use his services.

“That . . . would be amazing,” Patrick says. “I could really use the clients right now, honestly.”

“Lots of people around here with good business ideas but without any sense of how to handle the nitty-gritty stuff,” Karen says. “You could do well here. So long as you’re trustworthy.”
Patrick thinks again of the Rose Video story, wonders if it’s in the minds of some of the entrepreneurs around here, how easy it is to see all your work brought to nothing by one asshole. “I guess I’ll have to prove that to people, over time,” he says. Karen nods.

“Good answer,” she says.

Patrick wonders how much time he’d have to invest here, before the locals would trust him, and whether he’s going to be here that long.

When they get down to the last few frames, Ronnie punches him on the arm. “Hey, you’re improving, kid.”

Patrick narrows his eyes at her, and she laughs. His scores have picked up somewhat, and he even pulled a couple of strikes, but it’s not a stellar performance overall. “Yeah, just not in enough time to do us much good. I guess I’m rusty, but now I’m back in the swing of it you better watch out for next time.”

“Yeah, I’m shaking,” Ronnie replies, taking a sip of Karen’s margarita. “You used to bowl?”

“Nah, not really. But I played sports. Kind of a baseball guy, plus some hockey and lacrosse.”

“Baseball, huh,” Ronnie says. She gets a scheming look in her eye. “You any good?”

“High school shortstop for three years,” he says, comfortable enough post-margarita to brag a little. He remembers how it used to feel, the sun on his shoulders, the smell of oil and leather and dirt, the careful strategizing, and most of all those moments after winning games, when all the guys would fall together into a pile of joyous, tackling hugs. He loved that, that team feeling.

“Uh-huh. You played since then?”

Patrick thinks back. He’s a little shocked to remember how often he used to play, during the summers when he wasn’t at university and then after, when he moved back home again, with old high school friends of his. There was a local league, plus casual pick-up games now and then. He can’t quite remember when he’d fallen away from it, but he knows in the last couple years all his equipment has just been gathering dust in his closet next to his guitar. He remembers his friend Mike asking him to come out to games, up until about a year ago; after a lot of unexplained “no”s from Patrick, he’d stopped asking. Not long after that is when Patrick thinks he lost touch with Mike, in fact.

He brought his baseball equipment along in the car, as Ray had noticed, couldn’t quite bear to let go of it no matter how long it’d been. But he doesn’t even know when he last went to a game, or heard the crack of a bat anywhere but on the TV.

“A little. Not recently.”

“Well, show up at the field out back of the co-op on Sunday, we’ll see what you got.”

Patrick decides that he could be the kind of person who shows up to a tryout like that, the kind of person who likes being with other people, who doesn’t sit around in his apartment every evening too tired to do anything. New Patrick could be like that: friendly, outgoing, social. The way he used to be.

“Okay,” he says.

In the end, Ronnie and Karen win, but the rest of them don’t make it easy, which seems to make
Ronnie happy.

Patrick can relate to that, the joy of real competition and a real victory. “Good game,” he says, just like he used to. His instincts are coming back.

“Good game,” Ronnie agrees, nodding at him.

He gives Ray a lift home afterward, and as they’re driving through the dark something occurs to him, something that Ronnie said, and he can’t quite get it out of his mind. Probably better to get it cleared up, he thinks.

“Ray, you, uh. You didn’t take me as your date tonight, did you?”

Ray’s inquisitive eyebrow is somehow really sweet. “Why, did you want me to?”

Patrick lets out a nervous laugh and shakes his head. “No, I—I just don’t want any misunderstandings.”

Laughing, Ray claps a hand on Patrick’s shoulder. “No, Patrick. I’m actually seeing someone I met online. A very nice young man named Joon-ho. He’s a bit younger than me, so who knows how long it will last, but it’s fun while it’s happening, right?”

Patrick nods, surprised. He hadn’t known that Ray was—was interested in men. Maybe that’s why Ronnie assumed what she did, he thinks. Because she knew about Ray. The weird part is, Patrick hadn’t known about Ray. They’ve spent most of the last week together, as roommates and as colleagues. He can’t pinpoint any real signs. He replays conversations in his head: everything seems so normal, to Patrick. Though he guesses he can imagine, now, what led Ray to leave home as a young man.

“Sounds nice,” he agrees. “Let me . . . let me know how it goes.”

“Oh, I will,” Ray promises. “Now, do you want to stay up and have popcorn and watch a movie, or go right to bed?”

Patrick decides that he can be the kind of person who stays up and has popcorn and watches a movie, at least this time. He tells Ray as much.

They watch whatever’s on Ray’s cable movies channel, something with explosions.

“So how do you know, uh, Ronnie and Karen and Jeff and Emily?” Patrick asks, when it’s on a commercial.

“Oh, there’s a local LGBTQ2AI-plus event that some of us go to. It’s just a nice way to socialize and meet people in town. Ronnie roped me into it as soon as I moved here. Quite a while ago, now, come to think of it.”

Patrick can imagine; the signs out front don’t look new. He wonders whether the event was called that same long acronym twenty years ago, when Ray had first moved here, or whether it had just been a Gay and Lesbian night, or something. He doesn’t know, and doesn’t think he wants to ask. He realizes that he’s never been in a room with more than two gay people before. Or—whatever letter they are. Queer? He doesn’t know the words. He doesn’t even know what all the letters and numbers Ray just said mean.

A few weeks later, thanks to Karen’s connections through the women’s business association, Patrick has amassed a tidy little client list from the surrounding towns, people he can help with their small businesses, farms, and home offices. He’s sleeping soundly in his room at Ray’s, he’s learned not to leave his car at Bob’s Garage without getting an estimate in writing first, and he’s figured out which items on the Café Tropical menu are the most edible. He’s been to bowling again, and liked it even more than the first time. He’s even gotten an offer from Ronnie, after he showed up for tryouts, to be her new second baseman.

He feels good. He likes New Patrick.

He gets busy to the point where, one Thursday about a month after he sets up shop, he has appointments with clients all day—a packed schedule, for the first time—and by the end of it, he’s exhausted but satisfied. He’s building something good here, he thinks. The work is somewhat interesting, as well; at least now he gets to be part of what regular people are building, rather than just running numbers and strategies for big, faceless companies. He likes finding loopholes and money to help small, local businesses stay on their feet. Some of the locals’ business ideas are so wacky, or their business sense so hopeless, that he’s not sure they deserve to stay on their feet, but it’s still nice to give them advice, give them a fighting chance. Who knows, maybe the lady with the cat-hair scarves is onto something. Maybe Bob really can make a bagel shop work with no restaurant or bagel experience. For some reason, people in this town are just . . . really optimistic, and it makes Patrick feel optimistic, too.

“Patrick! I feel like I haven’t had a chance to talk to you all day,” Ray says, as Patrick’s last client—a guy with an organic dairy farm halfway to Elmdale—walks out the door.

“Yeah, it’s been busy,” Patrick says. He feels himself smiling, a little.


Usually, Ray’s the one inviting him out to bowling or for lunch at the café. Patrick’s never reciprocated, but he wants to now, to thank Ray for all the support he’s given him since he got to town. “Want to celebrate? Dinner’s on me.”

“Unfortunately I’m having dinner with Joon-ho this evening,” Ray replies, mock-frowning. “Well, I say unfortunately, but it’s fortunate for me! I haven’t seen him in ages. Can we take a raincheck?”

“Sure, sure,” Patrick says, and stands there with his hands on his hips, watching as Ray leaves the house. To go spend time with his boyfriend. That’s as it should be, Patrick thinks; Ray should spend time with his boyfriend.

He decides to celebrate on his own, instead, taking himself out to the café and getting a beer with his dinner. He eats by himself, reading a book on the building of the Panama canal that he’d started reading years ago. He picked it up again last week, thinking that New Patrick could be someone who finishes books, finishes projects, is happy with his life.

“The Path Between the Seas,” Twyla, the waitress, reads, from the front cover. “Is it good?”

“So far. I’m only a little ways in, though,” Patrick says.

“History was my favourite subject in school,” Twyla says. “Of course, I had to drop out to get a job to support my friend Jacklyn through rehab, but I always thought I’d like to learn more.”
“Wow,” Patrick says. He can’t imagine doing something like that, reckless and, and selfless. He doesn’t know what to say. “That must have been hard.”

“Well,” Twyla says, “anything for a friend, right?” She smiles sunnily and waves her hand in front of her face, as if that kind of life decision is a silly passing fancy. “Anyhow, I could always get back into it.”

“I can loan you this, when I’m done,” Patrick offers, and Twyla nods.

“I’d like that,” she says.

Patrick orders another beer, because the first one tasted great, and because the book isn’t holding his attention all that well, and because he keeps thinking for some reason about Twyla giving up everything, giving up her dreams, for a friend who needed her.

By the time he finishes dinner, he’s a little tipsy, and his tipsiness makes him want to get tipsier, so he buys a bottle at the tiny hole-in-the-wall LCBO and takes it back home with him. Ray’s still out on his date with Joon-ho in Elmdale, Ray’s out having a great time with someone he loves, someone who loves him, so Patrick pours liberally for himself and turns on the TV.

Two hours later, he’s crying during an episode of Masterchef and too drunk to stand.

An hour after that, he’s facedown in the toilet, alternating between throwing up violently and cleaning the bowl so that Ray doesn’t find out that he’s been throwing up violently.

When he thinks it’s safe to come out of the bathroom, he curls up in his bed around his phone and reads his last text from Rachel, from a little over a week ago. I just wish you’d talk to me, it reads. Patrick wishes that too, sometimes: he wishes he’d talk to her. He’s an asshole for not talking to her, after all they’ve been through together. She was his best friend. Now he has no one.

He thinks about it, and tries a few times to write something to her, something about how he’s New Patrick now, or how he’s doing fine, or how he misses her and wants to come back. They’re all gibberish because he can’t make his hands work the way he wants to.

Before he can press send, he passes out.

*

He has client appointments the next day, too, so he drags himself out of bed and showers and gets ready for them. Ray says things to him in the morning, and Patrick nods along without really listening. He checks, again and again, to make sure he didn’t actually text anyone last night. He remembers wanting to text Rachel, wanting to tell her he’s sorry, wanting to tell her that he wants her back.

Part of him wishes he had done it. Another part of him hates himself for wishing he had done it.

Maybe it’s inevitable. Maybe she was right. You always fucking come back. Why is he even fighting it?

By the end of the day, the work he was enjoying so much yesterday feels empty and pointless. It’s exactly how he used to feel at his old job: going through the motions, the same things over and over, with no change or end in sight.

He could give Ray notice, he thinks. Finish out the month, and get back on the road. He could try to find somewhere else to be new, to start over, to figure things out. Or he could drive back home. He
knows, in the moments when he’s being honest with himself, that if he gets back in his car he’s going to go back home. He’s going to beg for his job back. For his apartment back.

As he’s considering picking up the bottle of rye in his closet again, and maybe getting drunk enough to actually text Rachel this time, Ray walks in.

“Hello! Are we all ready for games night?”

Patrick blinks.

“Games night?” Ray repeats. “The games night you said you’d come to this morning?”

It turns out he should’ve been listening to what Ray was saying while he was hungover that morning. “Right, sorry.” He can’t think of anything else to say, so he adds, “I am . . . definitely ready.”

“Good. Whew! And you remembered to get the snacks?”

Patrick says that he was just on his way out the door to pick them up.

“Don’t forget the pretzels!” Ray sings out, as Patrick picks up his keys.

He mostly keeps it together through games night. Ronnie and Karen are there again, and a bunch of other people Patrick hasn’t met yet. He tries to make himself care about their names and their jobs and their opinions on the little Monopoly tokens.

Joon-ho’s there, too; Patrick’s only met him a handful of times, when he’s come to pick up Ray, but seeing him and Ray sitting next to each other, tsk-ing about the cards they draw, making each other laugh with jokes about the little game pieces, Patrick feels a stab of regret, or maybe anger, something missing inside his chest that he desperately wants to blame someone for. His hand shakes with it as he methodically plucks his little hat from space to space along the only road that exists.

He misses having what they have, that intimacy. It’s why he wanted to text Rachel, last night. Why he still wants to. Because he misses that.

Or, he tells himself he misses it, but there’s a dark voice underneath that thought, telling him that he never had it in the first place. With anyone. And that he never will, because he’s a fuckup who’s too afraid to commit to another person, even the perfect person for him, even Rachel. He frowns at Joon-ho and Ray, who are wasting time fucking around.

“Your turn, Joon-ho,” he says, interrupting their quiet, close conversation. His voice comes out louder than he wants it to, and Joon-ho looks surprised. There’s a little silence around the table for a second.

“So, Patrick, are you gonna make it to the game next Saturday?” Ronnie asks, interrupting it. “Terry, our current second baseperson, is now seven months pregnant. And I just don’t think they’ve got the speed they used to.”

Patrick says that he’ll be there. He thinks about how angry Ronnie would be if he called her and cancelled on Saturday morning. He can see that happening, like a movie in front of him, playing out like it’s inevitable. He wonders how many times he’ll have to cancel before people give up on him, the way Mike did, the way all his friends back home did, eventually. Probably not that many. No one really knows him or cares about him here.

Over the course of the night, they all ask him polite questions about where he’s from and what he
used to do before coming to Schitt’s Creek, and they accept the vague, non-committal answers he
gives them. He could tell them more, could tell them what he did, how he screwed up, what he left
behind. At least then they’d know him a little better.

He doesn’t want anyone here to know him at all. He barely wants to know himself.

He keeps thinking about the hours he spent on the road to get here, belting along with country music
and occasionally sobbing so hard he had to pull over. He pulled over a lot of times, on that drive. He
also turned around once, before changing his mind and turning around again. He thinks all these
people would be less interested in him if they knew the truth about how he’s a coward who ran out
on his fiancée and his only chance at a good life.

He can’t go back. But he doesn’t know how long he can stay here.

After everyone goes home, he helps Ray clean up and heads to bed. He turns off his phone this time,
so he won’t be tempted to text anyone, and proceeds to get drunk again, sitting on his bed with the
door closed, drinking straight out of the bottle.

*

After a few days like that, he runs out of rye, and while he’s sober, during the day, he has enough
self-preservation that he doesn’t let himself back into the LCBO to buy another. He’s scared by the
idea that he’s been drinking himself into a stupor, night after night, but the fear isn’t as present as it
should be. The lack of fear is almost more frightening than the drinking.

So he drives by the LCBO, and he doesn’t go in. He keeps himself from going in. That night, he lies
in bed awake instead, thinking about all the mistakes he’s made, and tells himself it’s better. He can
get better.

But that hot, wild feeling, that anger or regret or blame that he felt watching Ray and Joon-ho, that
keeps happening at random times, even without the booze. When he sees Bob laughing with Twyla
at the café. When he looks at his schedule, some mornings, and has so little desire to do any of the
stuff he’s booked for himself that it feels like the opposite of desire, like revulsion. When he sees
Ronnie, walking down the street, an uncharacteristic smile on her face as she texts on her phone.
Patrick always tries to ride it out, tries to talk himself out of it: he’s fine, he’s doing okay, there’s no
reason for him to feel this way about these people. He’s gotten away from his old life like he wanted.
He’s a new person now. He should be happy.

It’s the same talk he used to give himself back home.

He reads Rachel’s last text again: I just wish you’d talk to me. She hasn’t texted since. Patrick
wonders if she’s given up on him, found someone else. The thought makes his stomach drop, his
skin go cold, and he thinks: if this isn’t love, what is? He thinks: I should text her back. He almost
does, day after day after day, but he doesn’t know what to write.

He keeps working. He showers. He eats food. He’s okay; he has nothing to complain about.

*

A week after Patrick’s drinking binge, when he and Ray are both between appointments and the
office space is unusually quiet, Ray pops over to Patrick’s desk and knocks on the wood in lieu of a
door. That in itself is not unusual; it’s a regular bit that they do together.

Patrick looks up politely at Ray’s knock. “Yes, come in,” he says, because it makes Ray laugh every
time he says that. This time is no exception.
“You are so funny, Patrick. That’s definitely one of the reasons why it’s nice having you around.”

“What can I do for you?” Patrick expects Ray to ask him to cover for him while he meets some clients at a property, or to ask him if he’s in for a casual night of poker. Patrick’s already debating with himself whether to say yes to the imaginary poker night or not, trying to come up with good excuses that Ray will accept. He could lie and say he has plans. Then he’d have to leave the house for long enough to fake it. He wonders where he could go. Maybe there’s a bar. Maybe he could just drive around by himself.

“Well, please don’t feel any pressure whatsoever to respond, but I have a somewhat sensitive personal question for you.”

Patrick looks up from his computer at that. He tries not to look nervous, but he can feel Ray watching him closely. “What is it?”

“You see, there’s a young lady who is currently looking for an apartment. Something small and affordable, but still with good light as she is quite an avid gardener. I advised her against the town center, of course, but—”

Patrick blinks and cuts him off. “What’s the personal question, Ray?”

Ray smiles. “She was in here the other day. Maya? She talked with you while she was waiting for me to finish with my photography client.”

Seeing the shape of it now, Patrick feels a low crawl of dread. That strange, fierce anger blooms inside him again, his skin going hot, and he’s desperate for Ray to just spit it out, already. “So you wanna ask me something?” he manages.

“Yes. The personal question is, are you interested in women? It’s just, I’ve noticed that you don’t seem to have a special someone around, and you’re really quite a catch. I know some would say it’s rude to ask, but how else are people supposed to get together, I ask you? Anyhow, I could line up some very attractive prospects for you, but I would need a little guidance as to your preferences when it comes to the various genders. But! Maya asked about you in particular.”

There are about twenty things in Ray’s little speech that set off alarm bells in his head, not least the idea of being shopped around town like a piece of real estate, but the loudest alarm, the most deafening, ear-splitting one, is the first, that Patrick hears along with the question *are you interested in women.*

No one in Patrick’s life, in his entire life, has ever asked him that before. It sends him reeling, his mind spinning in circles.

“I’m not—I’m not looking for a relationship right now,” he stutters. The old familiar thoughts roll by in his mind: that he’s an asshole, that no one should want to be with him, that he’s not worth getting involved with, that he’ll just fuck it up and run away in the end.

“Psssh, who said anything about a relationship? I was talking about a date. Dates are fun, you get to meet new people, have a conversation, eat a nice meal . . .”

Of course, of course Ray would be the kind of person who thinks dates are *fun.* Patrick mostly associates dates—especially first dates—with anxiety, with the sense that he has to do and say the right things, with the idea that the girl he’s with might see him as lacking. A date, for Patrick, has always just been another place where he has to work hard to prove himself. They’re exhausting.

When he’d imagined his new life, the New Patrick, he hadn’t imagined dating anyone. He hadn’t
seen himself with a girlfriend. It occurs to him that that’s a little strange.

“I’m not looking for that, either,” he says, eventually.

Ray shrugs. “All right, suit yourself! But do let me know your preferences if you ever want me to set you up.”

“I will definitely let you know when and if that happens.”

Patrick tries to get back to the paperwork he was filling out. But he’s shaken by the conversation, and can’t focus for the rest of the day.

It only occurs to him later that he never actually told Ray that, yes, he’s interested in women.

*  

The question keeps bothering at him the next day, and the next. Ray had asked it so casually, as if he were asking about Patrick’s lunch preferences or whether he would rather watch a romcom or a horror movie. Are you interested in women. It scratches and taps at the back of his mind, like a stray cat.

He pushes it away to do his work, to smile at clients, to hang out with Ray. When it comes back, he tries to make himself laugh: of course he’s interested in women. What a thing to ask. He considers being annoyed at Ray, for asking, but then he has to admit that it’s probably a good thing to do, that it’s nice of Ray, not to assume. It’s probably something they should all do, avoid making assumptions like that, for the sake of actual gay people. But no one would assume Patrick is gay. No one would look at him and think that.

Instead of thinking about it, Patrick rewatches Game 4 of the 1992 World Series. Then he rewatches Game 6 of the 1993 World Series. Then he watches a bunch of Cito Gaston interviews on YouTube, and he thinks about player management and development, about the long-term allocation and acquisition of resources over time, about the careful combination of training, skills, personalities, and experience that has to go into making a team. You can’t just drop a star player anywhere and expect them to perform perfectly. You can’t just add something in after the fact and assume it’ll work out okay. A team is a complicated, delicate machine, Patrick thinks, watching the moment when Alomar hits that two-run homer at the top of the ninth to tie up the game. Gaston knew that, knew how to make sure all the pieces worked together in harmony. Alomar’s homer is exciting, maybe even beautiful to watch, but it’s the result of hard work, planning, tinkering with different components until they move smoothly together. What happens in those moments, those game-tying home run moments, is the result of everything that came before. Step by step, leading to this result, and the next result. If you interrupt the sequence, you start losing games.

Patrick was six when the Jays won the series in 92. He doesn’t remember much about it, but he remembers his dad cheering, crying, picking him up in his arms. He remembers the weightless moment, his dad tossing him into the air, the freedom of it. Unless that memory is from the next year, when they won it again; he can’t be sure; they blur together in his mind.

When Patrick got older, he watched those games again and again, on his dad’s old worn out VHS tapes, wanting to know how they were constructed, what went into making those singular moments of joy. And he learned: planning, strategy, work. Management. Nothing about them was actually spontaneous, not in the way people meant that word. Things like that homer don’t just happen.

On Friday it’s date night again for Ray and Joon-ho. Ray told him they were going to go a movie at the drive-in. Patrick thinks he’ll stay in and rewatch more old games. It’s a nice feeling, to watch a
game you already know well, where you can anticipate every strike and every hit and every double play.

Joon-ho shows up early, or else Ray is running late, Patrick’s not sure, but it ends up with Patrick answering the door and letting him in while Ray is still getting ready upstairs.

“I think Ray’ll be down in a minute,” he says.

“Cool,” Joon-ho says. They wait around together.

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“No, I think we’re heading out right away.”

There’s a little silence, filled only with the sound of running water upstairs. Patrick hopes Ray’s not getting into the shower. He tries to think of something to say.

“So, you made the drive down from Elmdale just to go to our drive-in,” he manages, eventually.

Joon-ho shrugs. “Sure. Well, Ray and I started off long-distance—dating app, you know how it is—but it’s not like there are a ton of opportunities for queer men in the area, so we thought we’d give it a shot. Now we’re kinda getting used to all the driving.”

Patrick nods. He hadn’t thought about that, how your opportunities got limited when you were, were queer, or whatever. “I think it’s good,” he says. “That you find time to see each other.” His stomach knots up, as he says it, and he’s not sure why.

“It’s not a chore,” Joon-ho smiles. “Honestly, with grad school being what it is, I look forward to date nights with Ray like a kid waiting for Christmas.”

Was there a time, back before the engagement, when Patrick felt that way about a date night? He can’t remember. When it’d been something exciting, maybe, a date to a hockey game or camping or to see a concert. He remembers being excited and giddy, the time he and Rachel took a spontaneous road trip to Winnipeg to see a show at Rainbow Stage, remembers kissing her in the car, so happy to be setting out. But. Not for the equivalent of the Schitt’s Creek drive-in.

*Are you interested in women*, Ray had asked him, like it was a choice you got to make.

Patrick clears his throat. “That’s really sweet,” he says, and finds that it’s true, he does think it’s sweet. “I hope you two have fun tonight.”

“We will. Um. Related to that. Is it cool with you if I end up staying over here? I hate driving back to Elmdale in the dark.”

“It’s, yeah, of course,” Patrick says, automatically, feeling his stomach twist again. “It’s cool with me.”

Ray finally comes down the stairs, looking not that much different from when he went up, but smiling, confident. He kisses Joon-ho on the cheek, and Joon-ho smiles, obviously pleased.

“Sorry to make you wait,” he says. “Patrick, thank you for entertaining Joon-ho while I was getting ready!”


Patrick goes to bed early that night, long before he expects Ray and Joon-ho back. He wants to give
them privacy, in case they come back and—need privacy. For anything.

*

The next morning, he wakes up antsy, restless, like he’s already overcaffeinated. He has no real work to do, and he doesn’t want to hang around the house all day. He doesn’t really want to see people, either, though. He eats breakfast and thinks it through. Something is compelling him to move, so he finds some clothes to hike in and sets out, not sure yet where he’s going.

Jeff had recommended a hike to him, a couple weeks back, but he doesn’t remember the name of it, and has no clue how to get there. He drives to the café, wondering if anyone there might know.

“Hi, Patrick,” Twyla beams at him, as he walks in. “Get you some breakfast?”

“I already ate,” he says. “I was hoping for directions, actually. Do you know Jeff? Jeff and Emily Jeff?” Patrick realizes in that moment that he doesn’t know their last names, but Twyla nods.


“Okay, so, he was telling me about a hike he likes to do. Richards? Russell?”

“Roberts Point?” She grabs some plates from the window, turning and depositing them with a couple of customers sitting at the counter. They thank her and she smiles at them. Her smiles always look so genuine.

“I think so, yeah. Do you know how to get there?”

“Hmm, dunno. Ronnie?”

Ronnie’s sitting at the far end of the counter; Patrick hadn’t even seen her behind the other people. She looks up from her newspaper. “What?”

“Do you know how to get to Roberts Point?”

“Sure,” she says. “C’mere.” Patrick walks over to her, watching as she grabs a clean napkin and pulls a pen out from her front jacket pocket.

She narrates the directions as she draws, in clear, neat lines, everything labelled by her swiftly moving hand. She’s a contractor, Patrick remembers, suddenly, like his Uncle Doug.

“And there’s no parking area, but you can just pull over on the road, everyone does,” she finishes. “Got it?”

“Got it,” Patrick says, taking the napkin. “Thanks.”

It’s a nice walk, fairly challenging on the uphill slopes, and not crowded, either; he only passes two people on his way up the little mountain. Jeff had suggested that it wasn’t well known, but was one of the gems in the area, and when he gets to the top, he can see why: the view is spectacular and there are hawks circling in the sky nearby. Even the air feels fresher and more life-sustaining than the air in town.

It’s a place for clarity.

He sits down on a rock and pulls out the lunch he packed, but doesn’t open it. He drinks in the view instead.
Are you interested in women. It echoes around his mind again and again, like it has been for the last few days. Up here, in the clear air with the sky open above him, it’s even louder. No one has ever asked him that before, because everyone in Patrick’s old life already knew. They all knew that he’d dated Rachel, and when he was on the outs with Rachel he’d dated Jackie, and Michelle, and Sherry. He’d gone on dates with other girls, too. Everyone knew that, including Patrick, and so nobody asked, including Patrick.

When he’d met Maya the other day, they’d talked for a good fifteen minutes while she waited for Ray. He’d thought she was nice. She was clearly intelligent, and she had a deadpan sense of humour, which Patrick always liked. She was someone he might like to hang out with at a games night or bowling. He’d felt good about their conversation, afterwards. He hadn’t thought for a second about asking her out.

When Ray had brought her up, all he’d felt was fear. She ought to be the kind of person that Patrick would want to date.

Patrick has met gay people. He had gay friends in university. He would know if he were gay. He’s thirty-one; clearly by now he would know if he were gay. That can’t be the solution.

There’s a sound behind him, shoes on the graveled path: it startles him out of his train of thought and he turns to look. It’s another hiker, a guy, maybe a little older than Patrick. A normal guy.

“Wow, what a view, right?” the guy says. Patrick nods and clears his throat.

“That it is.”

“Mind if I sit?”

Patrick gestures at the space next to him, and the guy takes off his backpack and sits down. He’s got dark hair, broad shoulders, and is wearing khaki cargo shorts and a red t-shirt, even though it’s still barely spring and not quite warm enough for bare skin.

“Want some trail mix?” Patrick offers. The guy looks at him for a second, assessing him, then shrugs and nods.

“Sure, thanks.” He holds out his hand, and Patrick shakes some out of the bag for him.

“Patrick,” Patrick says, gesturing at himself.

“Ben,” the guy replies.

They make idle stranger chit-chat about the trail, the view, other hikes in the area that Ben recommends, the town itself. It’s not deep, but it’s pleasant, easy conversation.

I could touch him, Patrick thinks, suddenly, wildly, in the middle of a sentence. I could reach out and touch his hand, or his shoulder. Nothing to stop me.

As Ben talks, telling a story about a hike that had gone disastrously wrong, Patrick breathes slowly and lets his mind pursue that thought: maybe Ben would look up at the touch to his hand, his eyes meeting Patrick’s; maybe his eyes would warm, maybe he would lean in and kiss him. Maybe Patrick would run his hand down Ben’s chest to his belly, dipping his fingers beneath the waist of his shorts.

Every single thought in the sequence is a gut-punch, a shock, and none of them are hard to imagine at all.
He shakes himself out of it in time to hear the end of what Ben’s saying.

“—absolute disaster, but at least I wasn’t the one with poison ivy.”

Patrick chuckles, nodding, and lets the conversation lag. He realizes that he’s been wringing his hands, pressing his left thumb hard into his right palm.

After a few seconds, he says, “Well, I’d better get going.”

“Mind if I walk down with you?” Ben asks. “I’d like the company.”

It sounds like flirtation. Patrick blinks at him in shock, his mind turning inside out for a moment with the idea that maybe he did touch his hand, maybe they did kiss. He reminds himself of reality and forces himself to smile.

He’s just overreacting, he tells himself. Misinterpreting the signs, because he had that weird passing thought. Ben’s just a normal guy being nice to someone he met on the trail.

“Sure,” he agrees.

It’s significantly easier on the way down than it was on the way up. Patrick finds his legs moving quicker, almost in a jog, as they follow the natural direction of gravity rather than trying to fight against it. He’s still, for some reason, kind of breathless. As if he’s exerting himself more than he thinks.

They continue to talk of inconsequential things, and this time Patrick pays more attention. Ben’s funny and interesting, like Maya had been, someone Patrick likes talking to. He works as a surveyor, he says, which means he spends a lot of time alone in the great outdoors.

“It’s a strange choice to go hiking by yourself on your downtime, then,” Patrick points out.

“Ah, but I get to meet interesting people,” Ben replies. Patrick could swear that his eyes linger on him. He thinks and thinks of something to say to that, something neutral, or something flirtatious, or something to shut the flirtation down, but his mind swamps with words and phrases and he can’t get any of them out.

At the bottom, Patrick points to his car. “This is me.”

“Cool. I’m over there.” He points. Then he looks at Patrick, just for half a second too long, before offering his hand. “Well. Nice to meet you.”

“You too,” Patrick says, going through the motions of the handshake. His hand feels sweaty in Ben’s warm, firm grip. He thinks again: I could kiss him. The thought is exciting, nauseating, impossible, overwhelming, and so close to reality that he can feel it, can imagine how Ben’s mouth would feel pressed up against his. He wants to. He thinks he wants to, and it’s not in a way he’s ever wanted anything before. Ever wanted anyone before.

He lets go of Ben’s hand. He doesn’t kiss him. Ben drives off.

* 

Patrick spends the rest of the week looking at men. He feels a little creepy about it—they’re all his friends, acquaintances, or clients, after all—but he can’t seem to stop himself from glancing at their arms, imagining how they’d wrap around him, or at their faces, imagining how they’d kiss. He thinks about Ray’s constantly moving, expressive hands, how they might feel on his skin, and he thinks
about Jeff’s beard, how it’d feel against his lips. God help him, but when that boring, smiley, too-nice-to-be-real veterinarian guy comes in for some tax advice, Patrick can’t stop thinking about his shoulders.

Patrick gets turned on, thinking about the vet guy’s stupid shoulders, to the point that he has to excuse himself from the meeting and go to the bathroom and talk himself down, until his dick stops trying to get hard and his skin stops fucking tingling. It’s nothing like he’s ever felt before.

Most of all, though, he thinks about what it might be like to be with men, instead of women; to hold a man’s hand; to lie down with his head in a man’s lap and talk for hours; to talk about the person he’s dating and say he; to take a man to a romantic dinner, with everyone else in the restaurant knowing what it was; to be allowed to do all of these things, to be free to be the person who could do all of these things. The thought feels relaxing, even restful, like just imagining those situations eases something deep within him. At the same time, he feels excited, thinking those thoughts, happy, like different pieces within him are finally clicking together.

“I’m gay,” he says, quietly, to himself in his room one night, to try it out. He’s lying in the dark in his pajamas, covers pulled up to his chin. “I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay, I’m gay.” It feels good to say out loud, even quietly, even to himself. And the more he says it, the more he feels like it might be true.

It also makes him feel deeply, profoundly stupid. Who doesn’t know they’re gay, by his age? Who could be so oblivious as to miss the signs? He doesn’t know how he could say it to his parents, to Rachel, to anyone he knew from his life before. He knows the first question they would ask: why didn’t you say something sooner? and he knows the only honest response to that would be I didn’t know. He can’t stand the thought of that, of the pitying looks he’d get, the jokes people might make. How stupid everyone would think he was. How it’d reflect on Rachel.

Patrick fantasizes: knowing this feeling, recognizing this feeling, at fourteen, and telling his parents. He has no idea how well they would’ve taken it, but at least it would’ve been a normal thing, a thing kids work out at that age. There would’ve been books, probably, books they could’ve read together, or a guidance counselor to help. He can imagine those awkward, painful counseling sessions, can imagine them being useless and backwards, and he wishes more than anything that he’d had them.

Patrick fantasizes: falling in love with a man when he went away to university—immediately, his mind provides the image of Jason McNeil, who he’d met in Econ 101 and invited to their pickup baseball games and hung out with at every opportunity, and shit, if that isn’t a fucking realization, okay—falling in love with him and knowing it, and trying something with him in the foolhardy way eighteen year olds were supposed to try things, and bringing Jason home, as his boyfriend, to meet his family and friends. He imagines himself scared but determined, holding Jason’s hand: he thinks he could’ve done that. If he’d known.

Patrick fantasizes: knowing at twenty, or twenty-five, even, driving down to the gay club in Central Valley to dance, to kiss strangers, to be wild and reckless. He was never actually wild and reckless, even at twenty, so he adjusts the fantasy: himself at the bar, on a stool, drinking and chatting with the bartender on slow nights, meeting other guys who were the kinds of guys who sat at the bar on slow nights to chat with the bartender. Going home with those guys. Having sex with them. Rejecting it every time someone in his life tried to set him up with a girl, and eventually getting sick enough of it to tell them: to say, I’m gay, I am not going to date Michelle to his friends or his family.

He’s too fucking old to be having this realization now. Everyone’s going to think he’s too old. He knows that. But here it is, fully-formed, whether he likes it or not, and he can either deal with it, and keep feeling that glorious puzzle-piece-click feeling, or he can not deal with it, and go back to feeling shitty and miserable, to drinking himself to sleep at night.
The second one isn’t even a real option. He couldn’t do it: now that he’s felt this way, felt the edges of how he *could* feel, he wants it, badly. He swallows and scrubs his hands over his eyes, blinking through the subsequent white spots in the darkness. He wants to cry, but he wants to sing, too, or something like it. He lies in the dark for a long time, just feeling that new feeling.

* 

Patrick doesn’t tell anyone. He does his job, and thinks about the men he sees in the street, and he lets the thought settle in. *I’m gay.* It doesn’t go away, or stop feeling right; if anything, as more time passes, it feels better. He finds himself enjoying his work, again, and making it to every baseball game, and laughing with his new friends on bowling night. But he doesn’t tell anyone. He waits three weeks, until the third Saturday of the month rolls back around.

When that Saturday dawns, he hesitates over what to wear: almost everything he has is business or business casual. He settles on a pullover and a t-shirt, plus jeans, trying for something softer than his usual button-ups.

“You look nice,” Ray says to him, offhandedly, when he comes downstairs. Ray is working; Ray usually works hardest on the weekends, given the kinds of businesses he runs. Patrick shouldn’t interrupt. He licks his lips nervously.

“Thanks.”

He’d planned to wait until the afternoon to ask, but finds himself swarmed with nerves already, and the words come pouring out of him without much conscious direction.

“Hey, Ray, I want to ask you something,” he says, and Ray hums acknowledgement, but doesn’t look up; he’s sorting through a stack of flyers he’s had printed for newly available properties.

Patrick swallows. “Isn’t tonight the monthly get-together that you and Ronnie do?” Patrick’s looked up all the letters and numbers, one by one, read about them, but he’s not sure he could say them all in a row without stumbling.

“The LGBTQ2AI-plus night? Yes, it’s always the third Saturday of the month. It’s at Ronnie and Karen’s place tonight, so I’m anticipating poker or darts or something. And hard liquor.” Still sorting through the flyers.

Patrick nods swiftly, barely hearing the details. After a long minute amid the sound of Ray shuffling papers, Patrick gets his courage up enough to speak again.

“Can I come?”

Ray’s head comes up and swivels around so he can stare at Patrick; it’s a sensation not unlike being a wounded gazelle sighted by a hyena. Patrick feels exposed, his skin absurdly sensitive, like the smallest breeze could overwhelm him with its intensity of touch. He starts to sweat. He starts to wish he hadn’t said anything.

But then Ray picks his jaw up off the floor and smiles softly, and Patrick remembers that they’re friends, that Ray took him in and helped him when he landed in this town confused and alone.

“Of course,” he says, simply.

* 

Patrick waves shyly as he walks in the door to Ronnie and Karen’s place. There are a few people
here he’s already met, which is both good, since he’ll have something to talk about with them, and bad, since it means they’re looking at him and mentally revising their knowledge of him. These people know this thing about him now. He can’t just be a mysterious stranger with a business degree and a love of baseball.

There’s a surprise or two, as well: Jeff, who Patrick just saw the other day for bowling night, is sitting in the corner with a glass of wine, laughing with Karen, but his wife Emily is nowhere to be seen. And then there’s Twyla, from the café, who Patrick’s only ever heard talk about her terrible ex-boyfriends. He thinks through the list of initials Ray had rattled off, and wonders who might be which one. He wonders if it’s rude to ask. He thinks it might be.

“Patrick,” Ronnie says, nodding his way.

“Ronnie,” Patrick replies. He scrambles for something to say. “How’s that first base player of ours doing?”

“She’s gonna be fine. There’s nothing wrong with her arm.”

“Keep telling yourself that,” Patrick says. Ronnie narrows her eyes at him.

“Listen, rookie, if you want to make a play for team captain, I’d recommend waiting until you’ve been on the team more than a few weeks.”

“I’m just saying, you’re making the wrong decision on this one, Ronnie. We’re gonna get slaughtered in our game against that Thornbridge team if you don’t pull her outta that position. Give her some time to recover over in right field.”

“And who exactly is gonna fill in for her, hmm?” Ronnie raises her eyebrow.

“I would be happy—”

“Ah-ha! Can’t believe you admitted it.”

Patrick holds up his hands, laughing. “I just want what’s best for the team!” Ronnie snorts a laugh, then dismisses Patrick’s argument with a wave of her hand.

“Anyway, we’ll talk about it more tomorrow. And hey, it’s good to see you here, finally. Help yourself to some wine, or there’s beer and non-alcoholic coolers in the fridge, or water or whiskey on the counter.”

Patrick walks in the direction she gestures, towards the kitchen, his mind reeling with the implications of that word, finally. Had Ronnie thought he was gay this whole time? There’s no way she could’ve possibly known that when he didn’t know himself, could she? The thought eats at him. He wonders what kinds of signals he could possibly have been sending out.

He avoids the whiskey, still skittish from his last tangle with hard liquor, and opens the fridge to find the beer instead.

“Get one for me too?”

Patrick takes out two beers and spins around to hand one of them over to whoever was talking. He comes up against a familiar face.

“Oh hey, I know you,” Ben says. “Patrick, right?”

Ben pops both the tops and catches them expertly before they hit the floor. Patrick smiles at him, and he smiles back. *He’s really handsome*, Patrick thinks, experimentally. *I find him handsome.*

Ben coughs and steps back. “You should, uh, you should meet my boyfriend, he’s around here somewhere. I didn’t know you came to these things!”

“It’s . . . my first one,” Patrick admits. He catches his breath, hoping that Ben won’t ask him anything that will make him confess that it’s his first gay *anything*.

Ben doesn’t.

“Awesome. Welcome.”

Ben claps a hand on his shoulder, the same way any guy might if he ran into a friend at a party, but it feels more important than that, to Patrick: it feels warm, and steady, and like a minor revelation. Patrick thinks he must seem dazed and slow while Ben introduces him to his boyfriend, Steven, a smiling, handsome guy with a receding hairline wearing lipstick and eyeliner. Patrick shakes his hand, and that feels revelatory, too.

“You two been together long?” Patrick asks, which he thinks is a normal kind of question you can ask couples, even gay couples. It makes Ben duck his head.

“Few weeks,” he says.

*I missed out*, Patrick almost says, wanting to articulate the source of Ben’s embarrassment, but he manages to stop himself just in time. He doesn’t feel bad about it, though. He feels glad. That moment, on that hike, their connection, had all been as real as he’d imagined. Ben is gay, or, or one of the other letters that means he likes men; Patrick could’ve kissed him. Just that is plenty, is overwhelming, that he could’ve kissed a man in theory. He’s not sure he’s even ready to do it for real. Much less do . . . anything more.

He makes small talk with them for a little while, getting more comfortable. He wonders, watching Steven’s mouth, how you know if you’re the kind of gay man who wears lipstick sometimes. If he could be that kind of gay man. His mind rejects it initially as preposterous, but then he thinks about it, really thinks about it, and finds he doesn’t know; he has no actual instinct for it in any direction. The possibilities suddenly seem endless and dizzying.

He makes his best to circle around the room and meet a few people, trying to act like he’s just new in town, rather than new to his entire sexuality. Everyone’s really nice, and gradually, he starts to relax. He talks about his work, and how he likes the town, and what it’s like rooming with Ray. People chat with him about their own passions and projects and problems, and every time someone uses a pronoun he’s not expecting, to describe themselves or their partners, Patrick feels a little pulse of energy over his skin, like a tiny electric shock, waking him up, making him aware.

Some people move or talk or dress in ways he thinks of as stereotypical: women with short haircuts and masculine clothing, or men who move their hands gracefully, let their voices rise. Patrick doesn’t ever remember being taught how to move his hands or use his voice, but he realizes that it must’ve happened, somehow, gradually, and over time. Then there are people who don’t fit any stereotypes Patrick knows, who he would never notice on the street, who people would probably assume are . . . whatever. No letters at all. There are so many options, is the thing: so many styles, so many ways of taking up space in the world. A lot of the young people have piercings; is that a gay thing? He thinks
about the other sexualities and genders he’s looked up recently. Could it be a queer thing, or maybe a nonbinary thing? He doesn’t know.

After an hour or so, he’s startled by a piercing whistle from Ronnie, the same one she uses on game days, but so much louder in this smaller space. Everyone shuts up immediately, which was obviously her intention.

“Geez, Ronnie,” Twyla says, hand to her ear.

“Gotcha all listening, though, didn’t it?” Ronnie deadpans. The room laughs. “All right, all right, since it’s my turn to host, and since everyone’s finally here, I’m gonna pull today’s theme out of the hat.” She holds up an old, oil-stained trucker’s cap that reads Bob’s Garage in a very 80s font.

Patrick’s standing near Twyla, so he leans towards her and asks. “What’s up with the hat?”

“Oh, hi, Patrick,” Twyla says, grinning, all freckles. “Nice to see you here finally.”

“Thanks,” Patrick says, trying not to freak out at that word this time. “The hat?”

Ronnie is dramatically dipping her hand into the hat, fluttering through the bits of paper inside. Everyone is clapping and yelling.

“Oh, every month we all write suggestions for topics for these get-togethers,” she says, brightly. “So whatever topic she picks, we all discuss for the evening. Usually we do it as a big group for a while, then people can talk amongst themselves if they want. It’s fun. Well, unless someone writes a really awful one, but when that happens, we can veto it. It’s a good system.”

“I see,” Patrick murmurs. It sounds terrifying to him, but what the hell does he know.

“Usually it’s good to have a drink or two before it starts, though,” Twyla cautions. Patrick takes a self-conscious swig of his beer.

Ronnie draws her hand out of the hat, to much cheering. She looks at the paper.

“Oh, hell no, we’re not doing this,” she says, and crumples it and throws it onto the floor. Everyone cheers again, and she goes in for another. When she pulls that one out, she laughs.

“Okay, okay, I’ll go with it,” she says, then reads: “Happy teenaged experiences.” She pauses, looking around pointedly, ostensibly to see if anyone wants to veto. No one does. “All right, teen years it is. For those of us who can remember back that far.” The crowd laughs. “So. Who’s first?”

Someone Patrick doesn’t know puts up her hand—his hand? their hand?—and tells a story about rescuing a dog from a flood, and then later adopting that dog. It’s nice.

He turns to Twyla. “So, it doesn’t have to be like . . . a gay teenaged experience? Or whatever?”

Twyla shrugs. “It can be whatever you like.” She smiles blindingly. “If you’re here, it’s queer.”

A few more people tell stories. Jeff tells one that opens with “Well, as you all know, I didn’t transition till after high school, but . . .” and everyone laughs along with the silly story about being awkward around his high school girlfriend, and then gets a little weepy when he talks about how she helped him cut his hair short for the first time, and then laughs again when he talks about the shit he got from his parents for it afterwards. It’s strange, because it should be a sad story all the way through, and Patrick can imagine it in a movie, being sad, the heavy soundtrack when Jeff’s parents yell at him, the rejection. But the way Jeff tells it, it’s wry and funny, real in a way that kind of movie
never is, with Jeff’s grounded, adult sense of exasperation and self-deprecation behind it.

It doesn’t hurt that Jeff himself is standing here with them, smiling and laughing, acting as his own happy ending.

Twyla tells a long, rambling anecdote that gets bizarrely dark in places, but then ends on, “. . . and that’s how I ended up stealing that horse and riding off into the sunset,” so everybody cheers anyway.

When she finishes, she elbows Patrick. “You should tell one. Let everybody get to know you.”

Patrick hesitates, frozen. He can’t think of anything more frightening than letting everybody here get to know him. But he can think of a good memory, and the more he thinks about it, the more the itch to tell it starts to overwhelm his fear. He waits through a few more stories from the others, rehearsing it in his mind, and eventually puts his hand up.

“Patrick!” Ronnie acknowledges. “Everybody, this is Patrick’s first time to one of these shindigs, say hi.”

“Hi, Patrick,” the room choruses, and Patrick ducks his head.

“So, uh, I wasn’t out in high school,” he says, thinking that it’s the understatement of the year. “But I was on the lacrosse team.”

“Yeah you were!” someone yells. Patrick looks over, shocked, to see that it’s Steven. Steven raises his glass and blows Patrick a lipstick-red kiss. It makes him feel warm, safe, like there’s nothing he could say that would end his membership in this club. Like they would accept even a sad story from him. Like they have no particular expectations. It’s a new feeling. He smiles back at Steven.

“So, I was on the lacrosse team in grade eleven,” he continues, “but we weren’t very good.” He remembers back to those days, all the long, difficult practices that got them basically nowhere, and he starts to see it in a new light. He quirks his lips. “We spent a lot of days, um,” he pauses, then works up his courage, “shirtless and sweating together, but for some reason didn’t seem to improve.” Wild cheers from the crowd at that; Patrick laughs to himself. He can feel his blush, but doesn’t even care.

He hesitates, not sure what to say next. The seconds tick by, and he can feel himself getting more anxious, more red in the face, trying to find a way to say it, to express it. His tongue feels too thick in his mouth.

“Was there a boy?” Looking up, he sees Ray standing across the room, calm and smiling, meeting Patrick’s eyes. Patrick nods at him.

He doesn’t have to think about the question very hard. “His name was Peter,” Patrick says, to a smattering of applause. “And he was . . . gorgeous. And kind, and a year older than me.” He closes his eyes for a moment, thinking back to all the times he watched Peter on the field, all the times he babbled about Peter’s lacrosse skills at family dinners. He didn’t know; up until this very moment, he didn’t know. But he thinks he knows now. He’s reading his own history backwards and upside down, truly seeing it for the first time as he speaks it to this crowd.

“We were a really terrible team, but Peter was great. He carried us to the provincial championships that year, last seed, but we made it. And when we got there, we proceeded to fail epically. We won zero games. We got trampled.”

Patrick licks his lips and looks up, looks around at the people assembled here. They’re all relaxed, anticipatory, listening. “We had one last game, and there was no point in playing it, really. Unless we
won by a lot, we weren’t moving on in the championship. But Peter got us all excited—”

“Yeah he did!” Steven yells, making Patrick break out laughing. He feels close to hysterical, now, like he might lose it at any moment, go from laughing in a normal way to laughing in a scary, out-of-control way. But Twyla rubs her hand on his back, and it grounds him. He takes a breath.

“Got us all excited,” Patrick repeats, “and I decided I wasn’t going down without a fight.”

There are a few low whistles that draw Patrick’s attention to the double entendre. He blows through them, feeling his face heating up again. “The other team was tough, way better than us. We played like hell, though, and after a lot of push and pull, we had it tied up. Just less than a minute left to play, we were up near the goal, and Peter passed the ball to me.”

He pauses, remembering: the surprise he’d felt when Peter had passed to him, rather than running up to the crease himself; the sense of trust and responsibility, the little nod Peter had given him, even though Patrick was only a midfielder and hadn’t scored a goal all game.

“I remember the rush of adrenaline. I remember Peter watching me, yelling encouragement at me.”

Across the room, Ray is smiling at him, and so is Ronnie, and Karen. Patrick takes a quick, surprised breath. He feels tears behind his eyes, and blinks them back.

“I didn’t even think about it, I just scored the goal, my first and only goal of the day. And we won the game.”

Everybody claps and cheers. “And you went on to win the championship?” Jeff asks.

“Hell no,” Patrick says, still blinking back his tears. “We only won by one goal, and the other team still advanced. But God, it felt good.”

“And did that cute boy ever kiss you?” Ray asks. He’s such a romantic; Patrick grins at him.

“No, but he carried me on his shoulders.” The cheers at that throw Patrick back into the moment, makes him remember it clearly: the firm, sweaty grip of Peter’s hands on his legs; the sensation of being lifted, easily, borne by Peter’s strength; the heat of their bodies where they were pressed together, his thighs pressed close to Peter’s face. It comes back to him like a lost memory, all in a rush, and he feels it like he’s feeling it for the first time.

“And that was my favourite moment of high school,” Patrick concludes. He’s told that story a dozen times, a hundred, in his life, but he doesn’t think he ever understood it until now. He moves, quick as he can, to wipe his eye before any tears can slip down his cheek.

“Good story,” Twyla whispers, next to him.

“Thanks,” Patrick whispers back.

He settles in to listen to the next person.

*

When they get back home that night, after the party, Ray takes him by the shoulder and looks at him for a long moment. Patrick is suddenly terrified that Ray is going to kiss him. He has a lot of feelings about it all at once: that Ray is kind of cute, after all; that Patrick needs to kiss somebody eventually; that Ray is his friend; that Ray is dating Joon-ho, and that sometimes people date multiple people at once but Patrick’s not sure if he’s into that; that Patrick doesn’t need any complications in his life, and that he’s not necessarily ready for this at all, from anyone, and—
“Patrick,” Ray says, gently. “Would you mind if I just gave you a really big hug?”

Patrick blinks, and his thoughts stop in their tracks. “I—sure, I guess. I’ll take a hug.”

Ray does, pulling him close and squeezing him tight. After a few seconds, Patrick squeezes back. It feels necessary, suddenly, like breathing, like his need for his heart to keep on beating, to be in this hug with Ray.

He doesn’t know how long it lasts, which is how he realizes that he’s always timed his hugs with other men, before, counting off the seconds before back pats and letting go. It’s freeing to be able to touch, to not have to worry about what people will think.

“I’m so glad you came out to the shindig,” Ray says, when he draws back. Patrick nods.

“Thanks for taking me.”

Ray smiles and pats his shoulder before walking away, heading upstairs to his bedroom. “Let me know if you want me to set you up with any boys,” he says, as he goes.

“I will,” Patrick says, and even though he has absolutely no intention of doing so, even though he’s a little horrified at the idea of Ray using his hard sell approach for matchmaking, and even though he can’t quite picture it yet, going on a date with another man, even with all of that. It’s a nice thought.

Chapter End Notes

Flight of the Roller-Coaster, by Raymond Souster

Once more around should do it, the man confided . . .

And sure enough, when the roller-coaster reached the peak
Of the giant curve above me, screech of its wheels
Almost drowned by the shriller cries of the riders—

Instead of the dip and plunge with its landslide of screams
It rose in the air like a movieland magic carpet, some wonderful bird
And without fuss or fanfare swooped slowly across the amusement park,
Over Spook’s Castle, ice-cream booths, shooting-gallery; and losing no height

Made the last yards above the beach, where the cucumber-cool
Brakeman in the last seat saluted
A lady about to change from her bathing-suit.

Then, as many witnesses duly reported, headed leisurely over the water,
Disappearing mysteriously all too soon behind a low-lying flight of clouds.
Patrick gets back from running some errands a couple of days later and is greeted by a handful of written notes from Ray.

“Messages,” Ray says. “One new client wanted to make an appointment, so I hope you don’t mind, I took the liberty of glancing at your planner and penciling him in.”

Patrick considers saying that he does kind of mind that, because Ray has never been very good at privacy, or boundaries, but he supposes there’s nothing in his planner that’s even remotely personal.

“Maybe next time just write it down on a slip of paper,” Patrick says, taking the messages.

“Of course, of course,” Ray says, in a way that means he absolutely won’t. “Anyway, I scheduled him for next week. He’s bought the general store, and needs to file to incorporate.”

Opening his planner, Patrick flips to next week and sees Ray’s handwriting. David Rose, it says, business license, 11am.

“David Rose,” Patrick says. “Like, the Rose family? Since he’s been here, Patrick’s noticed that their name comes up a lot around town. Ronnie occasionally tells a laughing, eye-rolling story about Moira Rose’s antics on town council—though Patrick’s never been clear on whether she approves or disapproves of those antics—and Ray had complained the other week about Johnny Rose preventing him from securing a new realty client, the person who owned the motel. Patrick’s thought about meeting Johnny Rose, maybe picking his brain for details about the Rose Video empire. Despite it being such a small town, though, Patrick’s never actually met any of them.

“The very same. And David is a real card, I’m sure you’ll love him.”

Patrick nods, because Ray says that about basically everyone. He checks to make sure he has some of the right forms on hand, then proceeds to forget about it.

* 

Patrick keeps on looking at men, and he starts thinking about dating. He was never very good at it with women, just tended to fall into relationships with friends and acquaintances. Someone would tell him oh, she likes you, and Patrick would dutifully get her number and call her, and then it would last for a while before falling apart. Or else it was Rachel. He has no idea how to do it with, with guys.

He has no idea if he’s even ready to try.

He could wait until the next LGBTQ2AI-plus night, and maybe try flirting with someone there. Or maybe there are . . . apps? He knows that Ray and Joon-ho met on an app, so it must be possible. Not that he’s going to put any blood in the water by asking Ray about it; Ray would be matchmaking before Patrick could finish the sentence.

So the next time Joon-ho comes by for a games night, Patrick waits for an opportunity to ask him instead. Eventually, the two of them are in the kitchen together, getting more drinks, and Patrick swallows hard and gets the question out.
“So, did you, um, did you tell me you and Ray met on a dating app?”

“Yeah,” Joon-ho says. “Bumpkin. Not that it’s exactly hoppin’. Most of the people on there are straight.”

Patrick nods. “Oh, okay.” He wonders if it’s worth doing anyway. He’s never done a dating app before. He thinks it might be embarrassing.

“Ray and I kind of lucked out,” Joon-ho continues. “I just wanted someone cute to do nerdy stuff with, you know? For some reason all the queer guys in Elmdale were like. Super hipster. As if Elmdale isn’t a cultural wasteland.”

“Ray’s a good catch if you’re looking for a nerd,” Patrick tries, smiling. “He talked about this new camera lens he’s getting for like an hour yesterday.”

“I know, he’s really excited about it,” Joon-ho says, grinning as if this isn’t at least a little bit annoying. It makes Patrick feel soft towards him, him and Ray.

“You guys are cute,” he says, smiling shyly.

“Aren’t we?” Joon-ho grins. He has a broad, bright smile, the kind that you can’t help but smile back at, and warm brown eyes. “But anyway. Are you asking because you’re looking to date? You know Ray could hook you up with someone.”

Patrick shakes his head, holding up his hand in a slow down gesture. “I think I’d rather, uh. Do it on my own.”

“Understandable,” Joon-ho laughs. “Ray can be intense. C’mon, let’s take this stuff out to the other room.”

Later that night, Patrick looks at Bumpkin on his phone; Joon-ho’s right that most of the people on it are straight. And several of them are Ray, who has set his status to not available!, but still open to meeting new friends. He sighs and drops his phone on the bed. He’s probably not ready for any of that yet, anyway. What would he even put on the profile? Who wants to meet up with a thirty-one year old who only just found out that he’s gay?

He grimaces and starts making a Bumpkin profile anyway, clenching his jaw and stabbing his finger at the looking for men box. But after a while all the invasive questions and the cutesy hearts-and-winky-faces motif are too demoralizing for him to continue.

Maybe he’ll finish it another day. When he feels more ready.

* * *

When David Rose walks into Ray’s, Patrick’s glad he’s spent a lot of time practicing looking at men and finding them attractive, because David is drop-dead gorgeous and he’s pretty sure he would’ve lost his cool if he’d met him a month ago. David’s striking, is really the word for it, arresting, with dark hair and eyes and eyebrows that frame his face. David’s hand, when they shake, is broad and strong, like his shoulders, but his movements make him seem open, expressive, in a way Patrick definitely associates with gay men from TV and movies, with some of the men he met at the LGBTQ2AI-plus night.

He knows he shouldn’t make assumptions. He knows you can’t necessarily tell, that stereotypes are harmful, that it’s not something he should care about or feel things about, but he does: it’s a thrill, to see that kind of physicality in someone he’s meeting for the first time. Part of Patrick sings out at the
soft, ironic cadence of David’s voice, at David’s big, fluid hand gestures and facial expressions: part
of Patrick says, hey, we’re the same, even though they’re not, even though Patrick doesn’t know
how to speak or move that way.

It’s a gift that men like David give to the world, Patrick realizes, to let themselves be so seen.
He focuses on the paperwork, hoping that none of what he’s thinking shows on his face.

“So! Why don’t we start with the, uh, name of the business?”

“Oh, um, I’m oscillating between two names at the moment, so if we could just leave that one blank
that would be great.” As he speaks, he gestures, and Patrick notices for the first time the silver rings
on both of his hands, how they gleam and catch the light. He has nice hands, Patrick thinks. He
snaps himself out of that thought and tries to respond to what David’s actually saying, which is that
he’d like to leave the most crucial information on this form blank.

“Sure, sure. Give you more time to . . . oscillate,” Patrick says, with a significant pause. David makes
a little face at that, and it makes Patrick want to smile. He clicks his pen instead. “Um. Business
address?

David kind of winces, closing one eye. “Okay, so, I’m working on that? Um, I’m currently staying at
a motel and I think it might be confusing if I gave you the address to another business.”

Jesus, he’s so cute, and . . . charming? Is that the word for it? Patrick feels weirdly charmed. He
stumbles for a way to respond.

“Yup, for sure. We’ll leave that blank as well. Battin’ a thousand, here, David.”

“I don’t know what that means.” David sounds sincere. Is he sincere? Patrick can’t quite deal with it
if he is. Who is this guy?

As David continues to offer non-answers to every question on the business license forms, Patrick
can’t help but show his exasperation, nodding along with David’s rambling description of his
general, but very specific, store. It’s annoying that people with the ability to start a business are
always the people who put the least thought into it. But he has trouble being too annoyed, because
David is also just . . . delightful, to watch, to listen to. He catches himself smiling, unguarded, at the
expressive way David communicates the phrase yeah, it’s an environment?, and he works hard to
tamp it down.

He’s surprised to find himself feeling something warm and sharp, something like adrenaline; it’s the
way he’d feel in the bottom of the ninth with the bases loaded, a little out of his own body, lost in the
moment. He matches David’s arrogant energy with a few little digs of his own, talking in a way he’d
normally never speak to clients. He’s never felt quite this way before, this combination of delight and
nervousness and absolute confidence.

Eventually his exasperation wins out over his enjoyment of watching David try to explain his
business, because Patrick can only take so many local entrepreneurs who haven’t even bothered to
draw up a business plan before trying to incorporate, and David’s his third one in the last week. Still
buzzing a little with that odd, wired, adrenaline feeling, he gives up and offers David the papers to
work on by himself.

“When you have a clearer idea of what you want to do with your business,” he says, pointedly,
which is way harsher than anything he’s ever said to any other client.

“Okay. Um. I do have a clear idea,” David says, clearly annoyed.
“Oh,” Patrick says, unable to help himself, wanting to tease, wanting to push, to see what David says. “You’ve settled on a name, then.”

David cocks his head, taking Patrick in again, noticing him; it feels good, drawing his attention like that, the way David had drawn his. “Um. You’re either very impatient, or extremely sure of yourself.”

Patrick’s neither. He is enjoying himself, though. He throws David another sports metaphor, just to see what he does with it. David’s absolutely dismissive and totally unselfconscious I don’t play cricket feels like a reward. Patrick can’t help but smile. He wonders if this is flirting, if this is what he looks like when he’s actually flirting with someone he likes. He has no idea, but it’s fun. And frightening.

He gives David his card, and insults him by telling him he’ll definitely need it, which is a normal thing to do in a business situation and not at all the same as handing someone your phone number and asking them to call you.

After David leaves, Patrick wonders if teasing someone is really the best way to flirt, but hell. He doesn’t know if he’ll ever see David Rose again. And he’s done it, now, he thinks: whether he was any good at it or not, he’s flirted with a guy. He thinks it counts as flirting, anyway, even if it’s mostly in his own mind. And even if David never calls him.

He feels jittery for the rest of the morning, too full of energy, so he finds his good sneakers and goes for a run. It’s not his favourite kind of exercise—too repetitive, no point to it—but he needs to move, and he doesn’t think he could pull together a pickup baseball game on a weekday at noon. He pushes himself, running as fast as he can for little stretches, first smiling at the sheer joy of it, then laughing, body pushing against the spring wind.

*

As it turns out, David Rose does call him, while he’s showering and getting dressed again after his run. He leaves, in point of fact, nine voicemails. Patrick plays them in the office, which means that Ray overhears at first, the two of them shaking their heads and laughing together when David gives his own name as Patrick. The teasing must’ve really got to him.

Ray gets bored and goes elsewhere after about three of them, but that’s the point at which Patrick sits down, surprised by what he’s hearing, and starts actually listening.

It’s a solid business idea. David Rose is trying to build something, here in Schitt’s Creek, a place where his family landed against their will, and the thing he’s trying to build is . . . Patrick thinks it’s beautiful, actually. Community-focused. Smart. Creative. It’s not something he would’ve thought of in a million years. But David thought of it, and what’s more, David decided to do it.

It really is a general store, and also a very specific store.

He starts the voicemails over again, putting his headphones in. He ends up listening to them a bunch of times, enjoying the dramatic up-and-down tilt of David’s voice, the way he pauses to emphasize his words, the obvious passion behind them. It’s pretty clear that Patrick’s little comment about buzzwords got to him, because whenever he says a word like branding or immersive he stops to go on a rant about why, exactly, that buzzword is relevant here. It feels good, ticklish, to think that he got under David’s skin like that. That what he thought mattered to David enough to annoy him.

As he’s listening, he finds himself sketching on a yellow legal pad. At first it’s just a doodle to keep track, a diagram of the supplier chains that David’s describing. Then he starts on an outline of the
store’s potential tax deductions and the forms required, then a list of potential additional funding sources, because if David’s going to invest in that much inventory up front, he’s going to need additional funding. He jots a few notes about the food and beverage licensing, the liquor licensing, about health inspections; he does a little research and draws up a calendar for some of the local events around town that might take David on as a vendor, various festivals and flea markets where tabling wouldn’t be too expensive but would get the business name—Rose Apothecary, it’s clear that David wants to call it Rose Apothecary — out there.

“What are you up to over there?” Ray asks, interrupting Patrick’s concentration so suddenly that he jumps in his chair. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you!”

“No, it’s fine. I—it’s some notes for a client. Business . . . business notes.” Looking down, he realizes that he’s been listening to David’s voicemails on a loop for about an hour, and that he’s got five full pages of ideas on the yellow legal pad. He has no idea what the hell he’s going to do with them, because David certainly didn’t hire him for this, and he can’t imagine just handing them over like it’s a normal thing for one guy to write pages of frenzied notes about another guy’s entrepreneurial venture.

“Oh, for David Rose?” Ray asks. He’s not looking at Patrick. He’s looking through the mail.

“Yeah,” Patrick manages, hoping his voice sounds like a normal human voice. Maybe it doesn’t, because Ray looks up at him then, with that same hyena-spotting-a-gazelle look he gave Patrick last Saturday.

“You know, the word on the street is that he’s single,” Ray sing-songs.

Patrick feels his jaw tighten. He can’t deny that this is exactly the information he’d wanted after meeting David, but there was no way he was ever going to ask anyone for it. Thank God for Ray’s love of gossip.

“Why, why are you telling me that,” Patrick asks, trying to lean casually on the desk and failing, forgetting to phrase it as a question. Ray gives him a smiling, knowing look, and Patrick folds his arms. “I don’t need you matchmaking, Ray,” he says.

“Whatever you say. I was just passing on an interesting piece of local personal news.”

“Um. How come he wasn’t at the LGBTQ2AI-plus night at Ronnie’s?” A cold, disastrous possibility washes over Patrick as soon as he asks that question, and he can’t help but vocalize it. “Uh, he is gay, right?” Maybe it’s offensive to assume that David is gay just because he’s . . . whatever, effeminate, fashionable, free with his physical movements. Patrick isn’t any of those things, and he’s. Probably gay. It could work the other way, too, maybe.

Ray gives him a kind of pitying look. “According to Jocelyn, who had it from Roland, who had it from Johnny Rose himself—that’s David’s father—” Patrick nods, wishing Ray would hurry it up, “—he’s *pansexual*. And according to Twyla, who found out at a dinner party with both of the Rose siblings—that’s David *and* Alexis—he dated Stevie at the motel a couple years back.”

Patrick feels his eyebrows furrow.

“Stevie Budd? Who is a woman, Patrick, I’m sorry, that wasn’t clear.”

“Ahh,” Patrick says. He’s going to have to look up *pansexual*. He hasn’t heard that one before. But there’s no way he’s going to ask Ray.

“And according to Bob, who learned it from Twyla, who learned it from Ted, who learned it from
Alexis Rose, he also had a fling with a local carpenter for a while. Who is, in this case, a man. I don’t know why he hasn’t come to our LGBTQ2AI-plus nights. Maybe no one thought to tell him.” Ray thinks about it, frowning. “Though it occurs to me that we don’t have a P in there at all, so perhaps that’s the issue.”

“Okay. That’s a lot of gossip,” Patrick says. He uncrosses his arms, but then he’s not sure what to do with his hands. “Very juicy, thank you Ray.”

“You want juicy, you should google him,” Ray offers, over his shoulder, as he heads into the other room.

Helplessly, knowing without a doubt that it’s a terrible idea, Patrick picks up his phone.

* 

An hour later, he’s interrupted by a push notification, which blocks out the image Patrick was fixated on, of a slightly younger David Rose being breastfed by a woman in a faun mask at a gallery opening. The nipples are blurred out, but the rest of it is very, very clear.

He’s briefly thankful to the push notification for blocking it out, but when he refocuses and reads it, he sees it’s a text from Rachel, and feels a wave of guilt.

Hope you’re doing okay. Thinking of you today, it reads.

The thought occurs to him, not for the first time, that he should tell her, should explain why it can never work between them. Finally, after all these years, he has a good reason to give her, even if it’s way too late. But imagining telling Rachel makes him doubt himself again: is he gay? Could he be one of those other letters? Bisexual? Asexual? Is he sure? Will anyone even believe him when it took him so long to figure out, when he’s never so much as kissed another man?

He groans to himself as soon as he starts entertaining thoughts of hiring Ray to be his fake boyfriend, and dismisses the text.

Patrick closes the faun mask breastfeeding image, too, while he’s at it. He can’t really reconcile the man in the photo, or in the People magazine articles he’s now unfortunately read, with the person he met, or the person who left him so, so many anxious voicemails. The designer clothes were the same, he supposes, and parts of the attitude, but the David he met was . . . nuanced. Interesting. Prickly, sensitive. Obviously upset that Patrick didn’t believe in his business idea at first, and Patrick liked that, liked that he got his back up about his passion project. The man in People looked like he was nothing but hard, emotionless surface, but Patrick got the feeling that the real David had layers.

He stops himself before he starts thinking about David’s literal layers of clothing, and how it’d feel to remove them.

Maybe not asexual, then.

After arguing with himself for a good five minutes, he decides that it is normal for one guy to fill out another guy’s business license paperwork for him. There’s nothing to be read into that at all. And besides, he wants to do it.

* 

When David comes back in later that day for another form, Patrick feels that weird, reckless energy again, and finds that he can’t stop smiling, to the point that David has to ask him what and Patrick has to tease him mercilessly about his voicemails. But then he also finds himself telling David the
truth, that he likes the business idea, that he likes the slightly pretentious name.

“Would we call that pretentious?” David asks, in that rising-inflection judging-your-choices voice that Patrick already likes. “Or timeless?”

Patrick feels like he’s smiling in every single cell of his body, like his whole self is leaning into David’s space with joy. He gets in one more little dig about the voicemails before he goes, something deep inside Patrick thrilling at the look on David’s face, like he noticed Patrick, like he cares what Patrick thinks, like he’ll remember him. David Rose, who’s beautiful and weird and expressive and takes up so much space in the world, is going to remember him. Even after he’s left, Patrick’s still smiling to himself.

It’s not until he sits down at his desk again that he thinks about how long business licenses take to process, and his smile fades.

*

The Bob’s Garage team has a big game against a team from Elmdale that Sunday, so they meet on Saturday evening for practice and to work out some kinks in the lineup.

“I dunno, I think her arm is still not up to where it should be. You’re not doing her any favours keeping her there,” Patrick argues. Ronnie scowls at him.

“And I’m telling you, I’m team captain and I get to decide who’s on first base. Would it quell your ambition if I swapped you out with Danielle?” Danielle is the current shortstop, and she’s good at it, fast on her feet with a hell of a fast arm to go with it.

“It’s not about ambition, it’s about making the logical choice for the good of the team,” Patrick says.

“If you say so. Okay, listen. My plan for today, which I had already decided on fyi, was to observe Brenda in practice, and see how she does, and then decide whether to swap her out for the game tomorrow. Does that satisfy your complaint, rookie?”

“It does, captain,” Patrick says. He smiles, and gives her a salute with his gloved hand. “And hey, I wanted to ask you for a favour, if I could.”

“Really?” She doesn’t look impressed.

“Or—okay, I wanted to ask you for a favour for which I will pay you back at a time of your choosing.”

“I’m listening.”

“You’ve been on council forever and you know everything about it, plus you have connections with everyone in the municipality,” Patrick says. She raises an eyebrow at the flattery. “Who do you know who might expedite a business license?”

“I could help you out,” she says. “But I’m gonna ask for something big in return.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Patrick agrees.

Brenda’s arm actually holds up throughout the practice, and Patrick has to agree that Ronnie was right—she’s much improved since the last time they played. Ronnie lords it over him all afternoon.

At the game the next day, though, she can’t get the distance she usually does, and messes up a few
easy outs. Patrick gives Ronnie significant looks after each one, until she rolls her eyes and agrees to move him to first base.

Thanks to Ronnie, David’s business license comes in a week later, and Patrick isn’t even kidding himself that he’s excited for the excuse to see David again. He already picked out a frame for it, while simultaneously rehearsing his lines if David were to ask him about the frame: he could say some tamer version of the truth, like I wanted to celebrate your new venture, or he could come up with a tease that would deflect attention, like well, a risky new business needs every little donation it can get. In his back pocket he keeps a lie, in case he feels too shy to own up to it in the moment: they all come framed. That way David wouldn’t get weirded out, thinking this random stranger cares way too much about his business.

Patrick does, he can recognize that. He cares way too much about David’s . . . everything. He recognizes the feeling, the excited anxious reckless desire to be near David, to learn more about him, to talk to people about him: it’s how he used to feel about Peter on his lacrosse team, and about Jason in Econ 101. It’s weird to recognize it, and to only know in retrospect what it was, before. A crush.

He has a crush. It’s pathetic to be thirty-one and recognizing that you have a crush for the first time in your life, but still. It makes him happy.

He puts the license carefully into the frame and rushes over to the general store, hoping to catch David unloading inventory or something. Would it be weird of him to go to the motel, if David’s not at the store? He argues with himself about it the whole way without really coming to a decision, but to his relief there’s clearly someone inside when he walks up to the door.

He goes in and meets a young woman: David’s sister, Alexis Rose, who introduces herself by brushing her hair off her shoulder, leaning towards him, and pointing towards her collarbone, where a necklace with her initial fills the hollow of her throat. It’s the most casually sexual first introduction Patrick’s ever seen, from which he gathers that she’s flirting with him. She has some of the same big hand gestures that David does, though they look entirely different on her, loose and carefree, whereas on David they look more emphatic and deliberate.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Alexis,” he says, smiling. She offers her hand, sort of palm down, like she would prefer if he kissed it, and when Patrick shakes it instead, she leaves her hand in his for a really long time. Patrick is now pretty sure she’s flirting with him.

As she moves on to the homemade scarves and Mennonite cologne, taking opportunities to touch him, he finds himself a little bemused: it used to be that women flirting with him always made him feel anxious, uncomfortable, unsure of how to respond. But now, in the face of Alexis’s obvious interest, he finds he feels calm and unaffected by it. Like it’s fun, or funny, but doesn’t have any impact on him anymore. There’s no longer any response demanded of him.

It’s a refreshing feeling.

David comes in from the back, and Patrick turns to him immediately. He’s dressed in gray today, but with the same set of silver rings on his fingers that Patrick saw on him last time; he wonders if David wears those every day. They’re pretty, on his fingers, drawing attention to the way he moves and gestures.

Patrick likes the way he moves and gestures.

With Alexis there, planned statements A and B go entirely out the window; he can’t bear to tell David that he framed the business license himself, and mutters the lie, they all come framed, while he tries to think of something to do with his hands. It’s a good thing he does, because it turns out David
doesn’t even like the frame, which is a ridiculous thing for Patrick to tie his self-worth into, but it still feels like a blow.

They all talk for a minute, and Patrick finds he likes watching the interplay between David and Alexis, the snippy, teasing, competitive way they talk to each other. When David explains that most of his inventory is on consignment, shooting down Patrick’s critique of his business model, Patrick wants to smile, feeling included in the family banter.

“I stand corrected,” he says, and doesn’t miss the little pleased face that David makes at his approval. Consignment. That makes the whole thing a lot more viable, and Patrick already thought it was viable.

He agrees to move the boxes to help out. He thinks he’d agree to do just about anything, to be allowed to stick around here.

“Don’t you have, like, a job you have to be at?” David asks, as they unpack the handcream.

“I don’t have any clients this afternoon,” Patrick says, which is technically true because he moved all his appointments for today to later in the week. “Where does this one go?”

“The credenza in the southwest corner of the floor,” David replies. Patrick isn’t sure what a credenza is, but he knows southwest, so he takes a stab and he’s pretty sure from David’s approving nod that he gets it right.

“We’ve been wondering who would take over the space, what it would end up being,” Patrick says, as they unpack the handcreams. “At one point everyone thought it’d be a Christmas World. Would’ve been disastrous for the downtown street appeal.”

“And you no longer think that my store will be disastrous?” David looks up at him, a teasing twist to his lips, and Patrick feels like his heart literally skips a beat, just like they say it can in movies and stories, as if talking to someone you like can actually affect the operation of your internal organs. Patrick always thought that was ridiculous, before.

“I never said your store would be disastrous. I merely pushed you in the direction of being more decisive about what was an initially promising idea.”

“Ah, so you’re taking the credit on that, then. Very bold.”

“Behind every great business is a guy who’s great at filling out forms,” Patrick says, laughing a little when David looks viscerally offended by that sentence.

“That physically hurts me,” he says. Then, after a pause, he sighs and adds, “But you might be right. When my friend Stevie took over the motel, she was a complete mess for ages. Drowning in paperwork she didn’t know how to deal with. Thank God she got my dad as a business partner; he loves paperwork, and it leaves her free to insult and ignore her clientele, which is more her wheelhouse.”

Patrick gives him a nervous half-smile. “Is this the Stevie you used to date?” he finds himself asking, before he can think it through. He’s already kicking himself mentally when David turns to him, eyebrows raised.

“How on earth would you know that?” He seems equally offended and . . . maybe a little pleased? Patrick can’t tell.

“Uh, I hang out with Ray all day, so there’s basically no town gossip I haven’t heard. Sorry.”
David nods, and Patrick feels like there are calculations going on behind his eyes. He wonders what conclusions David would come to if he actually had all the relevant data: that Ray told him the gossip in an attempt to matchmake; that Patrick desperately wanted that intel; that Patrick remembered almost none of the other gossip Ray shared with him, but remembered every last word about David’s dating history.

“Well, I’m very sorry to hear that,” David says, eventually. “I’m sure the gossip situation around here must be bleak.”

Patrick laughs. “It is. That’s why we were reduced to talking about you, I guess.”

David shoots him a dark look, surprised and amused at the edges. Patrick feels it again, that little adrenaline-push that he gets around David, like all his nerves are translated into daring. He likes their banter, and he thinks David likes it too.

Alexis was sorting the lip balms by flavour, but now she takes a few light, coltish steps towards where David and Patrick are standing. “Um, David, since you have Patrick here to help, I’m gonna just get going.”

“Okay, thanks so much for literally nothing,” David calls back at her, over his shoulder. She hmphs, shoots him the finger, and storms her way out the door with an artistic twirl of her hair. Patrick smiles after her, amused.

He realizes, a second later, that David is watching him watch Alexis go. He coughs and ducks his head. “Your sister is sweet.”

David sighs. “No, she’s not. She’s flowers and chiffon and hair feathers concealing a will of pure iron.”

Patrick laughs. “I can see you two are close.” He’s joking, but he also means it: Alexis wouldn’t have been here in the first place if they weren’t, no matter how little actual work she was doing.

“Hmm,” David says. The corner of his mouth turns up a little.

They work quietly for a little while, David giving Patrick the occasional direction. Beyond just being around David, it feels good to be in this space; he meant it when he said that it was coming together. There’s something powerful about being here to witness this business being built, about having a hand in it from the very start. He likes it.

As he’s finishing up with the last box from the back, David walks up to him, holding a hammer by the bottom of the handle, pinching it between two fingers like it’s the tail of a dead mouse. “Okay, so, no pressure if you need to like—get going, or whatever, but I was wondering if you were butch enough to handle woodworking.”

Patrick raises his eyebrows. “Butch?” he replies. No one has ever called him butch in his life, other than his Uncle Doug, who calls all the guys that as a nickname. Patrick has never really liked it, Uncle Doug calling him that. He gets the sense that David is using it slightly differently.

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“Most cars don’t have carburetors anymore,” Patrick says, looking at the hammer, which is still dangling dangerously from David’s grip.

“Okay, are you going to help me to install shelves or are you going to talk about carburetors all day.”
It’s not a question, so Patrick can’t help grinning at him and answering it.

“I’m going to talk about carburetors all day,” he says. David’s eyes narrow, but his lips slide to the side like he’s trying not to laugh. Patrick loves it, loves it, wants to roll around in it, the way he feels when he gets that reaction out of David. Like they get each other easily, with this instinctive push and pull, even though they’ve only known each other a little while.

“Fine. Then I’ll just do it myself, and when the shelves fall on me and I die and the business never opens and Christmas World comes back, then you’ll regret the loss to downtown street appeal.”

“That would be a tragedy,” Patrick agrees, straight-faced. He takes the hammer. “Installing shelves isn’t woodworking.”

“Oh my God,” David cries. “Just get over there and be good for something already.”

Patrick does. He likes being good for something; he likes it very much. He switches out the hammer for the philips head screwdriver he’ll actually need for the job.

David holds the struts while Patrick lines everything up and screws in the wall anchors.

“I didn’t really date Stevie,” David says, when they haven’t spoken in a little while. Patrick looks at him, surprised by the return to the subject, then hastily looks down at the shelves again. “I mean, I sort of did. We slept together a few times. But it’s long over, and we’re much better as friends. Even if it means we sometimes both . . . both get interested in the same guys. Men.”

Patrick tries to process that, wonders if David’s trying to tell him he’s only interested in casual relationships. That could be good, maybe, if Patrick wants—if he decides he wants to try out—if he.

He swallows, his thoughts skittering to a stop. “Do you usually stay friends with your exes?” He dares a glance at David, who hums kind of . . . ironically.

“Shockingly, it’s my first time.”

Patrick nods, thinking about this, and reaches for another screw.

David clears his throat. “What about you?”

“What about me, what?”

“Do you stay friends with your exes?”

Patrick has, a few times, had very amicable breakups with women, and has gone on to see them at parties or in friend groups without really thinking much of it. Come to think of it, every time he broke up with Rachel, they came back together as friends first before falling back into—whatever. Sex. Dating.

“I guess so,” he says. “Kind of depressing, when you think about it, like no one was broken-hearted enough to want to avoid me.”

“I’m sure they were all devastated,” David assures him, smiling softly. Patrick smiles back, starting to panic, thinking about how to switch the track of the conversation. He’s avoided it so far, but he really doesn’t want to say she or her or give any names to describe his exes. He doesn’t want to give David the wrong impression.

He’s not sure how to give David the right impression, though. Or really what the right impression is.
He knows he wants David to think he’s gay. Which he is, he’s pretty sure: he is probably gay. But how he can get David to know that without lying about a made-up past experience or just awkwardly saying it straight-out, he doesn’t know.

Even if he did communicate that information somehow, he has no idea what he would want David to do with it. It feels good, to be in his presence, talking, but when David’s around, Patrick seems to swarm with different feelings and impulses that he’s not sure how to control. He doesn’t know what he’d do if David wanted to, to kiss him, or something.

“Well,” Patrick says, ignoring the hard thump of his heart and picking up the thread of the conversation, “not as devastated as you’re going to be if you install this shelf at an angle and everything falls off the side.” He gestures with his elbow, his hands currently occupied. “Lift that end higher. Where I marked it with the pencil.”

David lifts the left side a little higher, so the shelf is even. “But this is still not woodworking, is what you’re telling me,” he complains. “I am literally working with wood.”

“You’re really not,” Patrick says. “You never had shop class in high school?”

David hums again, which Patrick is learning is his way of signaling that he’s about to reveal something really pretentious about himself in a really self-deprecating way. “Well, there was a performance sculpture class that used chainsaws at my high school? But that always felt a bit excessive to me, so I never took it.”

“Ah.”

“Right.”

They share a smile, and Patrick’s heart does that thing again, that really unlikely and unscientific thing.

He stays for a few hours, helping David install a curtain rod between the main area and the backroom, fix a couple of broken credenza doors (during which he learns a lot about what a credenza is, information he could’ve lived without), and assembling some ladder shelves for the front window displays. He lets David do the bulk of the talking throughout, asking him questions about his family, the store, his life in Schitt’s Creek. Stevie comes up a lot, and Patrick almost wants to be jealous, but David seems so fond of her that he can’t help but find it endearing.

Everything about David is endearing, in fact, which should probably be more of a concern than it is. He likes that David clearly looks after his mother and his sister. He likes the anxious way David talks about the store, like he’s proud of it, but at the same time, like he’s desperately worried it will fail. He even likes David’s sarcastic takes on the people around here, the stores, the town, because underneath every quip is a lingering fondness for all of it.

David feels a lot, and isn’t all that good at covering it up, even though he wants to. He’s honest, Patrick realizes, even when he doesn’t want to be.

Patrick doesn’t say any of that, of course; instead, he makes fun of David’s ridiculously high standards until David goes a little blue in the face, then pivots to agreeing with him. It’s fun watching David twitch and work to keep up with the banter.

Patrick finds it endearing that he wants to keep up with the banter, too.

Eventually, David says he has to go and meet up with his family for dinner.
“Right, right. Well, it was nice getting to help out around the store a little.”

“Yes, thank you very much for all that you’ve done today.” Patrick can tell that this is practiced, like David has to remind himself sometimes to thank people for helping him.

“I don’t know if I was truly butch enough for all these difficult woodworking tasks, but I definitely did my best.”

“Well, if it hadn’t been you, it would’ve been Alexis, so. You’re definitely a step up.”

“Thank you, David. It’s nice you think I’m more masculine than your extremely girly sister.”

David looks like he wants to take offense on Alexis’s behalf at *girly*, but then he purses his lips.

“I, uh, sorry she was flirting with you so much earlier today.”

“I don’t mind,” Patrick says, because he doesn’t, really. He gets the feeling it’s just how Alexis is. He likes her.

“Okay,” David says. “Okay, well. I guess I’ll see you... when I see you.”

“Okay,” Patrick says. He feels awkward, not sure what to do with his hands; he tries to put them in his pockets, then regrets the decision. He and David end up having a half-hearted handshake, and then Patrick makes a not very graceful exit.

As he walks home, he finds himself going over every moment of his conversations with David, wincing at the parts when he said something awkward or made a joke that didn’t land, feeling glad about the parts where he made David smile or roll his eyes.

It’s a lot to think about, all the emotions he feels just from being in the store and being with David. He thinks he’ll go back up to Roberts Point, tomorrow.

* 

The early morning hike clears his head. There’s no one else on the trail, just him and the trees and the clean, fresh air that fills him up again with the same certainty he felt the first time he came here.

From the things David said the day before, he can see a hundred different ways he could help with the business, from grant funding to financial planning, and what’s more, he *wants* to do it. Not only because he’s increasingly smitten with David—though he can definitely admit that to himself, up here in the open air with no one around to see him think it, that he’s a bit smitten—but also because he loves the idea of actually building a business for once, rather than just advising from the sidelines.

He knows better than anyone that retail is risky, that most small businesses fail early, that the safer kind of work is helping other people follow their dreams. But he doesn’t want to be safe, anymore. And somehow both of the risks he wants to take are bound up together in one confusing mess of feelings, his interest in the store, his interest in David, bouncing off of each other and looping around.

He doesn’t want David’s business to fail, for the sake of the business and for the sake of David himself, who’s poured so much of himself into it. He wants it to succeed, and he wants to be part of that success.

He tells himself he’d do it whether he were into David or not. He’s not sure whether he’s lying. But he thinks that he could stand just being David’s business partner, that it’d be better than being a casual acquaintance who freelances financial services at Ray’s.
Walking back down the trail, he enjoys the feeling of surrender that he always gets walking this particular steep slope, like the earth is pulling him back to where he belongs.

As he showers and changes, he thinks about how to pitch to David; he figures that the nuances of tax prep or sales projections might not be the most enticing, and decides to settle on a proposal to apply for grant money, instead. He goes over the details in his head, in case David asks for them, and sets back out.

David’s not at the store when he goes by, so he camps out in the café across the street for an hour, trying not to watch for David out the window the whole time because that would be extremely creepy.

“Get you anything else?” Twyla asks him, after he’s finished the breakfast he ordered and his third cup of coffee. Patrick considers ordering more coffee, but Twyla, who knows that he normally drinks tea, is glancing worriedly at his empty cup.

“No, I’m good,” he says. “Thanks, Twyla.”

She clears his dishes and smiles at him. “Got some big client today, or something?”

“Uh,” he laughs. “Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Well, don’t overload on the caffeine. The last thing you want is to be all jittery and nervous when you’re trying to impress someone. My mom’s ex-boyfriend once took way too much speed before a job interview, and, well. They ended up having to call the fire department and animal control.”

“I will keep that in mind,” Patrick says.

“Don’t worry, Patrick. You’re going to do great.”

“Thanks.” He smiles wanly at her.

“See you at the next shindig?” she asks. “I’m hosting this time.”

Patrick realizes that it’s only been two and a half weeks since the last one, where he had gone and told his lacrosse story; it feels like so much longer. He’s only known David a couple of weeks, but he’s about to propose they go into business together.

He’s never made any decision this quickly in his life. He’s also never felt this good about any decision he’s made. He feels his smile broaden.

“You bet,” he says.

When he goes back across the street, David has an armful of credit card machine that he’s apparently hooking up. As they talk about investment and startup money, he fidgets with it, like he’s nervous. That, along with the clarity still fresh in his mind from the hike, is enough to build Patrick’s confidence.

He wants to tell David something of what he’s been feeling, about how much he’s enjoyed the little time they’ve spent together, about his life here and how he wants to take a risk. He even wants to tell David that he likes him, that he’s thought about kissing him. He wants to tell him what he hasn’t told anyone else in town, not even Ray or Ronnie: that he’s gay, and only found out recently, and has reinvented himself here in Schitt’s Creek.

“And, uh, in the interests of us potentially working together, I did want to, uh, come clean about
“Okay,” David says. He looks confused, but like he’s listening. Patrick panics, quietly. All that truth inside him is way too much, too much to lay on David right now, and Patrick couldn’t say all of it even if he was sure he wanted to.

But he wants David to know he cares, that he’s invested, not just financially. He looks around, eyes landing on the business license, which David had hung up on the wall in its too-corporate frame.

“I, um, I actually picked out that frame,” he hears himself say, not without ducking his head in embarrassment.

David’s face is laughing, but fond, and his voice gets soft.

“Oh. I see,” he says, and Patrick braces himself to receive back some of the teasing he’s given to David. “So thank you for making it very clear that I will be making the creative decisions for the store. And I guess you can handle all the business. Stuff.”

It feels good, like David sees that he’s being weird and sentimental and likes him anyway. Patrick smiles in relief. “I’m very comfortable with that.”

He’s going to get the grant money, and make this work. He tells David as much, and David looks impressed.

“Okay. I better get over to Ray’s. I have some appointments later.”

“You know once you start paying yourself to work here, you’ll have to quit your old job. I have a non-competition clause,” David says, as Patrick turns to go.

Laughing, Patrick says, “No, you don’t. But I’ll come back tomorrow and help out some more, if you like.”

“I . . . would like that,” David says, in a husky voice like it’s not a normal thing to admit, wanting to have help. Patrick has to force himself to nod and move away from him, towards the door.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

*

For the next little while, Patrick takes himself on the Roberts Point hike at dawn, works with clients in the morning, and then helps David out around the store in the afternoons, which, he’s learned, is when David is the most chatty and acerbic, simply because he’s the most awake. Patrick finds himself spending the mornings thinking about things to say to David in the afternoon, and even gets to the point of writing some of them down before realizing what he’s doing, putting that piece of paper through the shredder, and trying to focus instead on his work for Heather’s goat farm. Goats, he tells himself. Think about goats. It’s not wildly successful, as distraction tactics go.

One day, he gets a text from David, which is unusual; since the whole voicemail debacle, David’s been pretty restrained about using his number, which Patrick thinks is cute. God help him, these days, Patrick thinks everything about David is cute.

**David:** I won’t be in the store today, there is major drama going on that I have to deal with

Patrick smiles, because David’s talked about his mom and his sister and his dad, and there’s always some little intrigue going on.
Patrick: Your mom needs you to do her nails again?

There are dots to indicate that David is typing, then the dots disappear, like he erased it; then dots again, then no dots, then dots. Patrick starts to worry.

David: No my ex is in town and he’s an absolute shithead

Patrick blinks at the message. He wants, desperately, to meet David’s ex. David’s, apparently, ex-boyfriend. He also feels so much fear at the idea that it makes him want to curl up in a ball and die, because what must David’s ex be like? What must he look like? Some ridiculously handsome artist or something, with a name like Jasper or Lucian, someone Patrick could never compete with.

Patrick: So, one of those exes you didn’t stay friends with after

David: One of those exes who is an absolute shithead, yes, I was wildly depressed for months after Sebastien

Sebastien, Patrick thinks, right. Perfect.

David: Sorry, that’s way too much to share, ignore me.

David: He is a shithead, though

Patrick: I’m getting that. Want me to come and punch him for you?

David: That’s so sweet. Are you the punching kind? Is this part of the woodworking?

Patrick: Yes, punching is a form of woodworking

Patrick’s never punched anyone in his life, not a single person. He’s basically never seriously considered it, even when he was angry or upset. He was always the type to walk away. And he’s only joking now, of course, but he also likes the idea of punching this person he’s never met, if it would make David happy, if it would make David see him . . . differently.

He pushes that thought away. It’s ridiculous and violent and possessive and he doesn’t like it for himself.

As he waits for David to text back, though, he still feels it.

David: Very manly

David: No, I’m going to wait and see. He’s photographing my mother today. I can’t intervene without upsetting her.

Oh, so Sebastien is a photographer. Okay.

Patrick: Sounds like a tricky situation

Patrick: I’ll head into the store, then, and maybe refinish that dirty table you found in a barn and brought home with you

David: It’s an antique and it suits our aesthetic, clear varnish only please

Patrick smiles at that. Our aesthetic. It’s amazing how quickly David has transitioned to talking about the store in that way, like Patrick has a stake in it too, even though they’re still waiting for the grant money to come in.
David: Oh but you don’t have a key

Patrick: Can I come pick up the key?

He ends up swinging by the motel in the afternoon. David comes to the door and hands him the key, and then smiles at him, the big fake smile he gives to Bob or Roland when they come poking around the store, rather than the soft suppressed smile he always has around Patrick. It’s startling. Patrick doesn’t like it.

“Hey, you okay?” Patrick says. “You sounded upset in your texts.”

“Ugh,” David says, walking back into the motel room, leaving the door open behind him. Patrick follows, and shuts the door.

“Can I help?” Patrick asks, delicately. David sits down heavily at the little table, then looks up at him.

“Can you talk my mother out of being taken advantage of by a complete monster? Because I can’t.”

“Taken advantage of?” Patrick asks, startled.

“He took photos of her. Unflattering ones. She’ll hate it, and she knows she’ll hate it, but she’s doing it anyway. Because he sold her a bill of goods and then completely changed the deal, and she can’t say no because she’s too smitten with the idea of getting some pathetic, tiny piece of her old life back.”

Patrick thinks he gets that. He used to be so desperate to reclaim his old life that he was willing to compromise, too, even though he knew he’d hate it. He wonders what David still wants of his old life. He’s building something for himself in his new one, Patrick thinks, which is better. He wonders if David sees it that way.

“Well, if you won’t accept punching, which, by the way, I am very grateful for, because I’m not sure I could take him—”

“You could take him,” David interrupts. “You’re all butch, and he’s mostly sweater.” Then, perhaps realizing the easy comparison to be made, he glares up at Patrick in warning. “Not in a good way.”

“Right,” Patrick says, slowly, delicately, trying not to smile. To his delight, a smile plays around the edges of David’s mouth, too. “Gonna have to remind you again that I’m not all that butch. I’m five eight and I work with spreadsheets for a living.”

“In comparison,” David says, defensively. “You like baseball, or whatever.”

“So what I was going to say,” Patrick coughs, hoping his blush isn’t showing on his face, “was, if we can’t punch him, can we get the photos?”

David blinks up at him. “What?”

“Get the photos?” Patrick says again. “Like. Just get your friend Stevie to let you into his room, and steal the photos, and destroy them.”

“He’ll keep his camera stuff with him,” David says, sounding faraway. “He says he never knows when a frame will reveal itself in space and time.”

Patrick’s surprised into a laugh, which makes David look up at him curiously. “I’m sorry, he just
sounds like such a douche. You can do—uh. You can do better.” He tries to stop himself from saying that last part, but doesn’t quite succeed, and it comes out awkwardly.

“That’s really nice of you to say.” David stands up, clapping his hands on his thighs. “Well. I’d better let you go. I have plans to make and I wouldn’t want you to be an accomplice.”

Patrick nods. “Glad I could help. Technically I am already an accomplice.”

“Well then, thank you for that as well.” David cocks his head for a moment. “You’re really . . . steady. Good to have around.”

“What an amazing compliment.” Patrick says, over his shoulder, walking towards the door. He keeps his face turned away from David so David can’t see the smile that’s all over his face.

“Clear varnish only, please,” David calls after him.

* *

After finishing the table—which, David was right, it does fit with the store’s aesthetic, now that it’s been fixed up—Patrick heads back to the office and picks up his mail. He goes through it perfunctorily until he hits on a letter from Regional Innovation Ecosystems, and then he sits down heavily in his chair.

He doesn’t allow his hands to shake as he opens it. If this falls through, he does still have money in savings; he could become a direct investor in Rose Apothecary. As he draws the paper out of the envelope, he thinks about how he’d pitch that to David, how he’d explain his involvement if there were no payout for him.

Those thoughts fade away as he reads the words delighted to inform you that we have decided to approve your grant request. Involuntarily, he pushes back in his chair and punches the air, yelling “Yes!” out loud.

“Something to celebrate?” Ray asks, coming into the room. Patrick gets himself back under control.

“Grant money came through,” he says, trying to sound normal about it.

“Ah. That is very happy news indeed! Congratulations. For what business?”

Patrick doesn’t even understand the question, at first, then he remembers that technically he has other clients and he’s applied for money for them, too. “Rose Apothecary,” he says, eventually.

“Ah,” Ray says again, in a different way. “You’ve been spending a lot of time over there with David Rose,” he points out.

“Well, that’s because as of right now, David is officially my business partner,” Patrick says.

“Uh huh. So up until now, you were there because . . . ?”

“Because I’m interested in a local business, Ray,” Patrick says, severely. At the look Ray shoots at him, he has to give up. “All right, whatever. I like David, too. We’re just friends, though.”

“If you say so,” Ray agrees. “By the way, Ronnie was looking for you earlier. Seems you’ve been elsewhere a lot, lately.”

“I’ll give her a call later,” Patrick says. He realizes with a shock that Ray is right; other than baseball practice last weekend, and bumping into Ray around the office, he hasn’t talked to anyone but David
“Sorry I haven’t been around,” he says. “How’ve you been, Ray?”

“Oh, you know, same old, same old,” Ray says. “Except, one small bit of gossip: Joon-ho and I broke up.”

“Oh, oh no,” Patrick says, standing up. “Ray, I’m so sorry. What happened?”

He walks over to where Ray’s standing, but Ray just turns to him with a smile and shrugs. “He wanted to. I’m too old for him, I suppose.”

Patrick has sometimes, uncharitably, thought that himself, given that Ray’s probably in his forties and Joon-ho isn’t more than late twenties. He’d never have said it out loud, though, not least because, when the two of them were together, they were so sweet with each other. Joon-ho was very obviously smitten with Ray, and just corny and weird enough to be a good match for him, despite their age difference. Ray, in turn, was clearly gooey-eyed in love with Joon-ho. They like to make dad jokes and yell at the movies they watch and Patrick was . . . a little invested in them, maybe.

“Did he say that?”

“No; yes; I mean, not recently. He told me that some of his friends had said it, before, and he didn’t really give me much of a reason for it otherwise. I mean. He’s been having problems in his program, with his supervisor, maybe that’s part of it. I thought we were having a good time together. So.” Ray shrugs again. “Honestly, Patrick, it’s fine. It gives me more chance to focus on the closet organization aspect of the business.”

That’s so sad that Patrick can’t stand it. “Ray, you don’t need to be organizing more closets.” He thinks for a second. Something about the situation bothers him. He imagines Joon-ho’s friends telling him Ray was wrong for him, imagines Joon-ho giving in to that pressure. He and Ray really always seemed so good together. “Do you want me to talk to Joon-ho?”

“No no no—I wouldn’t want to do that to him. When someone breaks up with you, you should let them go gracefully.”

Patrick thinks about all the times that he and Rachel failed to let each other go gracefully. It was how they’d always fallen back into things, one of them pleading or demanding answers. This time, he’s trying not to answer her at all, but it’s hard. “I don’t mean I would pressure him,” Patrick says, carefully, thinking it through. “I’d just—check in with him, make sure he’s okay. Make sure no one else is pressuring him.”

Ray sighs. “I doubt it will do much good, but all right, if you promise not to make him feel any guilt about it. Or tell him I sent you. Or . . . mention me at all.”


“All right. Just—to make sure he’s all right. He hasn’t been in that many relationships, you know. I wanted to be gentle with him. Make it easy.”

Patrick feels like his chest caves in, just a little. He swallows around a lump in his throat. “I know,” he says.

“Anyway. Just think, now I’ll get to go on a bunch of first dates.” Despite his usually chipper demeanor and extreme case of extroversion, Ray doesn’t seem particularly enthused by the idea of going on a bunch of first dates.

Patrick gets Joon-ho’s number from Ray, and tries to imagine what text he might’ve wanted to
receive, after he broke up with Rachel. Or what text he might’ve wanted to receive, if he had broken up with someone he really loved and regretted it.

He writes: *Hey, it’s Patrick Brewer. Ray told me what happened. I hope you’re doing okay. I know you don’t know a lot of people in the area, so if you need someone to talk to, I’m here.*

Joon-ho doesn’t text him back, so in lieu of any other action, he runs to the store to pick up Ray’s favourite pretzels and ice cream and corrals him into a movie night.

“Thanks, Patrick,” Ray says. “I have to admit, I was feeling a little down.”

Patrick pats his knee. “We’ll get you through it, buddy.”

* 

**Patrick:** So how’d it go with Sebastien? Mission accomplished?

David doesn’t text him back for over an hour, a record for him. When he does, he doesn’t say much.

**David:** Got the photos

**Patrick:** Good job! See you tomorrow?

**David:** Yes

**David:** I had

There’s a pause. Patrick waits, wondering what that means.

**David:** Sorry, didn’t mean to send that. See you then.

He means to ask David for more details about the heist the next day, but when he gets to the store, Stevie is there, so he gets distracted. He somehow hadn’t met her yet, but finds that he likes her immediately. She’s quick, and funny, and likes to tease David, and Patrick can’t help but find some spark of hope in the idea that, if he has things in common with her, he might also be David’s type. Assuming that shithead photographers, carpenters, and sarcastic motel owners can be strung together to make a type.

In addition to Stevie, the fact that Alexis has lice is also somewhat distracting. Lice are disgusting, and he doesn’t want to even think of David being exposed to that.

Before he can think about it, Patrick finds himself making an offer.

“You can crash at my place tonight if you need to.”

It feels weird and forced-casual, even though it’s the kind of offer he would’ve made to any friend, back in the days when he had his own apartment. The realization hits him almost as soon as the words are out of his mouth: that what he has right now is a single room with one bed, and a roommate who is very likely to make faces at him over breakfast if he brings David for a sleepover. Having offered, though, it’d be weird to take it back, so he freezes in some strange combination of fear and hope that David will say yes.

David gives him a sweet little smile, and his voice softens to that low murmur he gets when someone does something nice for him. “Thank you, um, but Stevie offered her place this morning.”

“Ah,” Patrick says. He has no idea whether to feel disappointed or not.
The three of them work together well, throughout the day, and eventually the combined force of Stevie and Patrick’s teasing is enough to get David to take off the hat and the shower cap. His hair is hopelessly flat and sad underneath, though, even though he tries to fix it in the cracked bathroom mirror, and Patrick’s a little shocked at how much he likes looking at it, at David when he’s not perfectly coiffed and styled. Maybe, he thinks, it’s how David would look in the morning, or after a shower.

He shakes those thoughts off and concentrates on what they’re doing, instead: repotting the plants from Heidelberg Farm into the silver pails David picked out. Or, Patrick is doing that; David and Stevie are cleaning the new cupboards and filling in scratches. He gets the sense that neither of them wanted to do the job with the dirt in it, but he doesn’t mind. His mom does a lot of gardening, and working with the soil takes him back to childhood, a little.

He wonders how his mom’s garden is coming along this year. He should call her. He hasn’t called her in weeks.

“So, Stevie, I didn’t realize until recently that you owned the motel,” Patrick says. “How’s that going?”

“Wow, it’s so nice of you to ask,” she says, with a pointed glance at David. “I mean, I inherited it, so it wasn’t like I set out to own a dumpy little motel in the middle of nowhere.” It’s a brush-off kind of answer.

“Yeah? David says you and his dad have been fixing it up. Getting more guests. That sounds like a lot of work.”

“Oh, it’s plenty of work,” Stevie agrees, once again sidestepping the compliment. “It’s just not work I ever saw myself doing. Managing a business. I basically have no idea how to do it. Much like David. But unlike David, I have Mr Rose around to help.”

David gives her a deeply unimpressed look.

“I thought you used to manage galleries in New York?” Patrick says, as he moves a fern to its new home and starts scooping dirt into the pail. David glances up at him.

“Oh, no no, that needs to be higher up in the pail,” he says, and comes over to Patrick. “It’s gonna look sad, all the way down like that.”

“Well,” Patrick says, still holding the fern. “Scoop some more dirt in, then.”

Stevie comments on this idea by snorting a laugh from the other side of the store. Grimacing, David crouches down, picks up the scoop from the bag of soil, and starts filling up the pot.

“How’d you know that? About the galleries.”

Patrick almost panics, thinking that his phase of obsessive internet searching is going to be found out, but then remembers that they’ve talked about David’s galleries before. “You told me,” he says. “You said, crafting an aesthetic is something you learn after working with some of the world’s top designers, and I asked, when did you do that, David, and you told me.”

“Such a good memory,” Stevie says.

“I listen,” Patrick says.

David looks at him for a long moment, and Patrick feels his heart thudding fast. He can’t tell what’s
“My parents managed my galleries in New York,” David says, at last, looking back down at the pail, at his task. He moves a little faster with the scoop, taking less care with it. He’s going to get dirt under his nails. His nails look nice: neat and uniform. He’s going to get them dirty. “Or, they let me think I was doing it, but it turned out I wasn’t. They bought all my patrons, and all my artists, like my life’s work was a child’s toy they procured for me.”

“Damn,” Patrick says, which makes David look up at him sharply, waiting for his reaction. “That’s . . . a pretty awful thing to do.”

“That’s what I said,” Stevie agrees.

“When did you find out?” Patrick asks. “I think that’s enough dirt.”

David helps him move the plant so that it’s centered in the pot, then scoops in some more dirt to cover it. They pat it down together. Their hands touch. Patrick reminds himself that he’s touched peoples’ hands before and it shouldn’t be a big deal.

“I found out when I first made the plan to open this place, and was informed by my mother that I did not have the requisite skills to manage a business. Okay, so, we want all the plants to look like that.” He gestures at the pail. “But maybe cleaner.”

Patrick thinks about what David’s said. “Can you bring me the other bag of soil?”

David rises from his crouch and does, picking it up awkwardly and holding it away from his body, sort of shuffling back over to Patrick. It’s really cute to watch. He exchanges a glance with Stevie, who snickers.

“That’s—that’s close enough, leave it there.” He looks up at David and shrugs. “I think you’ve got a great business idea here. You obviously have some skills. You can learn the stuff you didn’t learn before.”

“I bet you’re a great teacher, Patrick,” Stevie says, and she sounds sarcastic, but when Patrick looks at her, she’s looking at David instead.

“Anyway,” David says, severely, shooting her a glance that Patrick doesn’t understand, “that’s why Stevie is taking advantage of my dad’s business knowledge, but I’m not. I wanna do this on my own.”

“On your own . . . with me and Stevie and Alexis helping out,” Patrick points out, grinning. “You gonna open that up?”

David finds the scissors and opens the bag of soil, then starts scooping into the next pot without being asked. “Well, there’s no need for me to do absolutely everything,” he says, making a face, rolling his eyes. It makes Patrick laugh.

“No, of course not,” Patrick agrees. He’s glad David’s made room in his vision for Patrick to help out, but he doesn’t say that. They finish with the plants, and David does complain about dirt under his nails as he washes his hands. Patrick offers him one of the birch wood/horsehair nail brushes they’ve recently got in.

“Business expense. The store can pay for it and write it off.”

David smiles at him as he takes it. “Thank you.”
Patrick nods, smiling back, then grabs his laptop and puts the cost of the brush in the appropriate spreadsheet.

For the rest of the day, as he watches David painstakingly apply Rose Apothecary labels to products, or hesitate over a decision about varnish colour, or run his hands consideringly over the plants as they place them in the window, making tiny adjustments, Patrick feels like he understands him better, understands why this business is so important.

Patrick sweeps up the spilled dirt and promises himself that he won’t let it fail.

*

That night, as he gets into bed, he remembers again that he asked David over for the night. It would’ve been such a disaster, he thinks, if David had said yes to the invitation. He slips under the covers and wonders what he would’ve done. Whether he would’ve tried to act like sharing a bed platonically was a perfectly normal thing that two adult male friends did all the time, or maybe would’ve tried to tease David into seeing it as non-sexual. His mind plans out jokes that he would’ve made in that alternate universe: *I’m sure I can resist your animal magnetism for one night, David* or *Yes, nothing sexier than a bed with no vermin on it.* He can’t quite picture it happening, but he can picture David lying in bed with him, hands folded over his stomach, breathing slowly. David, who’s determined to strike out on his own and get out from his family’s shadow. David, who’s building something for himself. David, in his bed.

It’s very far from a sexual fantasy, and that’s why it’s truly, truly ridiculous that it turns him on so much. He stays awake thinking about it for a long time, half-hard, not touching himself, just imagining: David lying next to him, eyes closed, mouth soft, breathing.

*

He tries calling Ronnie back a few times, but they keep missing each other, so he doesn’t see her until their regular weekend baseball game. They’re playing the Café Tropical team, the only other team in Schitt’s Creek; usually they have to drive out of town or have to host an out of town team. Ronnie’s gotten them together for a little warm-up before the game, so he takes that opportunity to toss a baseball with her and ask her what’s up.

“Oh, yeah, sorry I’ve missed your calls. I have a favour I wanted to ask you.” She tosses the ball at him, aiming high, and he jumps a bit and catches it with the tip of his glove.

“Is this going to wipe out the favour that I owe you from that business license thing?” he asks, tossing back, down and to her right where she always has trouble catching. She gets it this time, though.

“Dammit, rookie, throw somewhere else sometimes,” she grumbles. “And maybe. If you do a good enough job, I will consider wiping your slate clean.”

She tosses it back at him, an easy one this time, so he does the same for her.

“Sounds like you have a lot of power in deciding the exact magnitude of my debt.” Toss, thunk.

“That’s correct, yes.” Toss, thunk. Patrick grins.

“Okay, okay. What is it?”

Toss, thunk. “Well. You’re good with bureaucracy, and paperwork, and all that stuff. I have a friend who’s a veteran, but having trouble accessing her benefits. Lots of forms to fill out, and since she
transitioned all her ID doesn’t match all the paperwork from her time in service.”

Patrick nods, holding the ball for a moment before tossing it back. He’s been anxiously reading more about trans people, since he found out about Jeff, not wanting to say something wrong at bowling night. Government documentation had come up in a lot of articles. He can imagine that kind of paperwork is even more burdensome and endless when it’s got your gender wrong. “I don’t know anything about the VAC, though, I’ve never worked with those systems.” He tosses Ronnie the ball, low and right again, and she catches it easily.

“You could learn,” Ronnie suggests. She tosses it high again, and this time he misses it, has to run a little ways to pick it up. They’re getting to know each other’s weak spots pretty well, he thinks.

“Oh okay,” he says, when he gets back. “What’s your friend’s name?”

“Alice,” Ronnie says. “I’ll give her your number.”

The game is a total disaster. Bob’s Garage plays well, with Patrick still spotting for Brenda on first and Ronnie in her usual place on third. Danielle has an amazing game, letting hardly anything by her, and even Roland makes a few nice plays at home base. The disaster is Café Tropical, who make so many errors that Patrick has to stop counting. It takes forever for the Café team to get enough outs each inning, so Patrick feels like he’s spending all his time at-bat or on base, scoring hit after hit. On the rare occasion the opposing team gets a hit, they never manage to keep players on base.

By the end of the ninth, it’s starting to rain, and Ronnie’s stormcloud expression echoes exactly how Patrick feels. “Way less fun than it should be,” she grumbles, as they pack up the equipment. “Used to be, the town game was a big deal every year. We’d have a cookout or a potluck, lots of folks would come to watch.”

Patrick looks around; hardly anyone was here at the start of the game, and the stands are completely clear now. “Yeah. Without real competition, what’s the point,” he agrees.

“They haven’t been the same since Leo quit as team captain,” Ronnie confides. She hands the bat bag to Patrick and picks up the other one for herself. “He was fun to play against. Knew his trash-talk, too.”

“Jack’s captain now, right?” Patrick asks. Jack’s the pitcher; Patrick saw him yelling and pointing at the other players at various points in the game.

Ronnie snorts. “Yeah, by popular acclaim of himself. We should really get someone else in there. Liven up the summer a little more.”

“We’ll have to think of someone,” Patrick agrees.

* 

“So how was your baseball game this weekend?” David asks, on Tuesday morning.

Patrick looks up from the tote bag rack he’s assembling, surprised. “You want to know about my baseball game?”

David shakes his head a lot, closing his eyes. “Um. Sure, yes. Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because you told me you don’t follow cricket?”

“Well, yes. I mean, yes, I have never been that interested in sports in general. And yes, I do dislike
team sports in particular. Given today’s political climate, we don’t need to divide ourselves more than we already have.”

“We don’t—what,” Patrick says, utterly lost for a response to this.

“And yes,” David barrels on, “I would normally eschew all discussion of sports, since the only thing more boring than watching them is listening to someone describe them.”

He stops talking. Patrick tilts his head to the side. “But?” he prompts.

“But what?”

“You would normally eschew, et cetera, but?”

“Oh.” David clears his throat. “But, I thought I’d . . . ask about your interests. It’s the polite thing to do.”


“So? How was it? Please don’t make me ask again, there’s only so much politeness in the tank overall.”

Patrick smiles to himself. “Kind of awful, actually.”

“Did you . . . not do the baseball? Well?”

Patrick can’t help but look at him, then. He’s doing a half-wince that Patrick finds incredibly cute. “I did the baseball fine. Our team won. It’s the other team, they really sucked, so it wasn’t fun.”

“The fun isn’t in the winning?”

“The fun is in the competition,” Patrick says. “It has to be difficult. Otherwise the win doesn’t mean anything.”

“Hmm, I see,” David says, nodding. Patrick thinks he’s being made fun of, but he can’t quite pinpoint how. “Could you make the other team better? Step in as director?”

“Coach? No, I’m on Ronnie’s team, I couldn’t be seen doing that. Plus you couldn’t pay me to do that, they’re really bad.”

“So, it’d be a challenging task, then,” David says, waving his hands for emphasis.

Patrick narrows his eyes. “Yeah, but—”

“Something difficult to accomplish, that’d give you a real feeling of victory once it was done.”

“I think I’d get a real feeling of victory if I could get you to do some of the cleaning for once.”

“Hey, I’m not the failing baseball team that desperately needs a new handler.”

“Team captain?”

“You should do it. If you want to.”

Patrick shrugs, but he wonders, a little, what Ronnie would think of it.
“So did you play a lot of baseball as a kid, or—?” David asks, when there’s a little silence.

Patrick wants to tell David about it, about how much it meant to him growing up, how much he cared about his team. About what he now thinks was a junior high crush on the boy who played first base beside him for years. But he can’t tell that story without telling other stories, about his parents, his hometown, who he used to be. About Rachel, who played on the girls’ team, who spent hours and hours after school in his backyard with him, throwing the ball back and forth as the sun started to set.

“Little bit,” he says. “Hey, did the rest of those soaps ever come in?”

“This morning,” David says. “Everything’s accounted for. All here that should be here.”

“That’s good,” Patrick says.

*

The next Saturday, Twyla decides to hold the shindig early in the evening, and since the weather is so good she declares that they’ll have a barbecue and lawn party. Patrick brings a six-pack and some store-bought guacamole and chips, plus the book he promised to loan to Twyla, but feels a little ashamed when he sees the varieties of homemade potato salad and other side dishes.

“Gonna have to step up your game if you’re gonna hang out with lesbians,” Karen says, walking up beside him.

“You’re welcome not to have any of my beer or guacamole,” Patrick shoots back. “And is it a lesbian thing? Ronnie doesn’t strike me as a maker of potato salad.”

“I mean, don’t mess with Ronnie once in a blue moon when she decides to cook one of her Mama’s recipes,” Karen warns. “But, anyway, it’s a collective lesbian thing. It transcends any individual lesbian.”

“Convenient,” Patrick says. Karen grins. It feels strange, but good, to joke about lesbian things, gay things, to be in on that joke with her. They have this thing in common, they get to talk about it together. Patrick likes it.

“How’re you doing? I only ever see you from fifty feet away when you’re yelling at my wife about first base.”

“I don’t yell. We have to project to be heard across the field.”

“Funny, that’s what Ronnie says, too.”

Patrick smiles. “I’m doing really good. I’m getting the store up and running with David.”


“Just freelance consulting stuff, nothing like this. I was always advising people on businesses, not running one. And it is absolutely terrifying.”

Karen laughs. “Serves you right, getting to see this side of it, after spending so much time telling everyone else what to do. I hear you, though, I was nervous as hell before I started mine.”

“What’d you do?”
She shrugs. “I got really high with Ronnie and made out.”

“Not so helpful in my case.”

“You need a hookup for some weed?”

Patrick shakes his head. “No, I meant—I didn’t mean the weed part.” Patrick’s never particularly liked smoking up, though he did it plenty in high school, to fit in with his teams. He gets paranoid.

Karen narrows her eyes at him. “So you and David aren’t . . . ?”

“No, no. Just business partners.” He tries to say it without blushing, or looking away, or doing anything weird with his hands.

“Huh.”

Patrick realizes, in that moment, that he’s no longer a mysterious stranger with a business degree, that he’s part of this community, and well known enough in the town to be the subject of gossip. Karen has probably heard other people speculating on his relationship with David. He can’t really blame them; he would speculate, too, if he saw them from outside. It’s embarrassing, and it’s exactly what he wanted to get away from in his old life, that sense that everyone around him was expecting him to do one thing or another.

“Well, your loss. I mean, I’m gay, but I’d hit that.”

Patrick’s startled into a laugh. “You would?”

“Well. Theoretically. Soft men are nice.”

Finding himself smiling without really knowing why, Patrick thinks about that for a second. David has plenty of sharp edges and prickly spots, but overall he thinks Karen’s right, that he’s soft. In the middle, at least. And certainly in the sweater area.

“Is . . . is everyone talking about us? About me and David? We’re really just friends.”

Karen looks at him for a moment, then pats his shoulder. “Not in a mean way,” she says. “We just like you, and like thinking about you having good things. For example, a cute boyfriend. I can tell people to shut the hell up about it if you want, though.”

“I—no, that’s—no,” Patrick stutters. He’s never thought of that, that people would feel that way about him, that they’d want him to be happy so much they’d talk about it. He never felt like anyone in his old life was particularly invested in his happiness like that, without any expectations of their own. It’s freeing. “No, it’s fine.”

“All right,” Karen says, giving him an additional shoulder pat. “Now hand me the guac, already.”

There’s plenty of food, and badminton, and lawn darts; Patrick notices a lot more kids running around than at the previous nighttime affair. He gets to meet Jeff and Emily’s young daughter, Scout, and a group of three gangly awkward boys who turn out to be Ronnie’s nephews. Patrick can’t imagine being thirteen, like Ronnie’s nephew Anthony, and running around a party like this where men are holding hands with men, where women are kissing women on the cheek, where people get to wear what they want and look how they want. He watches Anthony and his brother Gabriel playing badminton with Ben and Steven, Steven’s lipstick in a lighter daytime shade of red this time, and he wonders what he would’ve done, what he would’ve been able to do, if he’d had this as a kid.
Terry, the second baseperson Patrick initially replaced on Ronnie’s team, is hanging out in an adirondack chair with their new baby, a tiny little thing dressed in an elephant-print onesie who is attending their first queer event at the age of one month. Patrick only ever met Terry briefly before, at his first baseball practices, but he goes over to say hi, drawn by the sight of the wriggling infant currently at the centre of this big, sprawling community.

“So cute,” Patrick says, crouching down next to the adirondack chair. “Hi, I don’t know if you remember me, I’m Patrick.”

“New in town, on Ronnie’s baseball team,” Terry says, smiling. They hold out the hand that’s not currently cradling the baby, and Patrick shakes it. Terry has wild, messy short hair styled up with product, and a bunch of tattoos. “Terry,” they say.

“So what’d you name—um. Them?”

“Elijah,” Terry responds. “And we’re using he pronouns for now. He can always change that later.”

“That’s beautiful,” Patrick says, and he thinks Terry assumes he means the name, but he means the other part, too, the idea of giving a child that choice. Elijah is wrinkly and bald and made entirely of potential, Patrick thinks. He could be anything. Anyone. Nothing is closed off to him, yet.

“How’s the season going?” Terry asks. “Bob’s Garage doing well? I haven’t been able to make it out to watch a game.”

“We’re doing great,” Patrick says. “Though the game against Café Tropical was pretty sad.”

“Yeah, I heard. Jack’s a bad choice for captain, if you ask me.”

“That’s what Ronnie said,” Patrick agrees. He watches as the baby yawns. Terry smiles.

“You have any kids?” they ask.

“No,” Patrick says, surprised by the question; how could anyone think he’s together enough to have kids? He searches for something to say to follow that up with. “I’m an only child, though, so. There’s always the pressure.”

“Oh,” Terry says, knowingly. “I hear you, it’s the same in my family. Still, though, it’s not for everyone.” They shrug with one shoulder.

Patrick’s never thought about it before, about having kids as a choice, or a preference. It was what everyone did, after they got married. It was what he had assumed he and Rachel would do.

If he’s gay, then this is something else he gets to decide for himself, he realizes; it’ll never happen to him accidentally, or as a matter of expectation.

He holds out his finger, and the baby’s hand brushes against it, soft and new.

The party continues, Patrick wandering around, talking to people whose names and faces he’s still getting to know. People are kind to him, welcoming; a lot of them stop to greet him, to ask how he’s settling in to town.

He tells them he’s settling in pretty well.

Because the badminton net is claimed, he and Ronnie decide to try out the lawn darts. Because it’s Twyla’s house, the lawn darts are the old kind, with actual pointy metal tips.
“Weren’t these banned?” he stage-whispers to Ronnie, as they try to play the game without killing anyone’s five-year-old.

“You tell Twyla that,” Ronnie snorts.

Eventually, as the twilight comes on slow and they light candles to keep away the mosquitos, Twyla holds up the Bob’s Garage trucker’s cap with all the pieces of paper inside it.

“Ready to bare your soul?” Karen jokes, coming to stand beside him again.

“Sure,” Patrick says. He finds he’s smiling. “Why not?”

* 

It doesn’t occur to him at the time, but after he gets home that night he realizes that he didn’t try to flirt with anyone, or ask anyone out, even though he told himself weeks ago that he would try. There were guys at the shindig he thought were cute, but even though he talked to some of them, he just—hadn’t thought to do it. Lying in bed, he reopens his half-finished Bumpkin profile and looks at it for a long time. He doesn’t really want to finish it.

Maybe he’s still not ready. Or . . . maybe his crush on David is more out of control than he thought it was. He lies awake for a long time, trying to think that through, but he falls asleep before he can come to any solid conclusions.

* 

Joon-ho texts him back, finally: Maybe I could use someone to talk to, yeah. Patrick replies right away, asking if he wants to meet for a coffee or something, but then doesn’t hear back from him again. He doesn’t know what Joon-ho is going through, but it really seems like he’s conflicted. Patrick wishes he’d just accept some help, already.

Ray continues to be as cheerful as ever, but Patrick notices that he doesn’t go on any of those first dates he talked about, and his Bumpkin profile, when Patrick checks, is still set to not available! It’s hard to tell when Ray is moping, but he’s certainly spending a disproportionate amount of time in the evenings working on closet organization strategies, which doesn’t seem right. He organizes the hall closet, the linen closet, his own bedroom closet, and the kitchen cabinets and pantries, over and over, until Patrick can never find his coats or his cereal. He doesn’t say anything, though, till one night when Ray corners him after he gets back from running errands.

“Patrick,” he says, ingratiatingly, “how would you feel about me taking a stab at organizing your closet for you? Free of charge. I would love to get a little more practice in.”

Hesitating, Patrick narrows his eyes. “I don’t know that my closet needs organizing, Ray,” he says, slowly. He thinks about it, Ray taking his time with Patrick’s things, finding places for them, putting them into a special order. Most of Patrick’s things are still in boxes. If he wanted to organize them, he could do it himself; he doesn’t need Ray to do that kind of stuff for him.

“Oh, of course it does! Everyone’s does. Imagine this with me, Patrick. It’s early morning. You’re tired and sluggish, trying to get ready for the day. You need a certain shirt or pair of shoes, but where are they? You spend an extra ten minutes rooting around for things when you could just be on your way. And then, bam, you’re late for work.”

“I work downstairs from where my closet is,” Patrick points out. “And I don’t ever really need a certain shirt?” All of his shirts are basically interchangeable.
He’s starting to see his mistake, though: Ray knows how to do the hard sell, and giving him objections only gives him more fuel. It’s not a big deal; Patrick should just let him organize the damn closet. But something holds him back; it would be weird, Ray touching Patrick’s stuff, seeing it, doing that for him.

“Ah, so you’re resisting expanding your wardrobe, because you prefer efficiency,” Ray says, a glimmer in his eye. “But if you had better organization—”

Patrick holds up his hands. “Stop, stop.” Ray does, waiting expectantly. Patrick tries to think of the right thing to say. Blurt out you just miss your boyfriend and are trying to take it out on my shoes is probably not the right thing. “I don’t—I don’t need your help, okay?”


Frowning, Patrick feels the need to say more, to explain. “It’s just that I don’t need it,” he says, eventually. “It’s not necessary.”

Ray shrugs. “Sometimes it’s nice to do things that aren’t necessary,” he says.

“Yeah, I know,” Patrick says, skipping right past that thought. “But it’s not . . . I’m fine the way things are.”

“I understand.” Ray nods emphatically. He’s smiling his business smile. “Please do let me know if you change your mind.”

“Okay,” Patrick sighs.

*

A couple days later, Patrick comes back home late after working with David at the store for most of the day. He feels full of energy and purpose, after his time there, and he hears himself whistling something—some tune he doesn’t know, something he should try to work out on the guitar, maybe. It’s light, simple, a little wistful, he thinks. In E major. The melody’s stuck in his head.

As he heads to his room to get the guitar, though, he’s confronted by Ray sitting curled up on the couch, crying quietly as he watches a movie. Patrick stops in his tracks.

“Ray?” he asks. He’s never been great with crying people, but he can’t just leave Ray like this.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Ray sniffs. “It’s just a sad movie.”

Patrick looks at the screen. “It’s You’ve Got Mail,” he points out, after a minute.


Patrick sits with him and hands him another kleenex. “How bout we make a frozen pizza for dinner tonight?”

“That sounds nice.”

They sit and watch Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks expertly navigate what was mostly, in Patrick’s opinion, blatant apologism for large corporations’ willful destruction of small independent businesses.

“Did you text with Joon-ho?” Ray asks, quietly, during one of the lulls.
Patrick feels his throat clench, and decides against telling Ray about the confusing text he got a few days ago. It’d only make Ray spiral further, he thinks. “I texted him. Haven’t heard back.”

“Okay,” Ray says.

They watch the rest of the movie. Ray cries through most of it. As the credits roll, Patrick swallows hard and says, “You can organize my closet, if you want to.”

Ray turns to him in surprise. “I wouldn’t want to overstep your boundaries,” he says, but his eyes are already lighting up. Patrick huffs out a laugh, because Ray’s never met a boundary he doesn’t enjoy overstepping, but he’s trying to be polite, and Patrick appreciates that.

“No, you know, the closet probably really needs it. I just threw everything in there when I got here, and some of it is still in boxes.” He hadn’t known how long he would be staying, was the thing. It hadn’t made sense to take things out of boxes if he was going to leave again soon.

Now he figures he might as well admit it: he’s invested in the store, in David and his store. He’s not packing up and leaving tomorrow. And anyway, he might actually want to look at some of his books on small business strategies.

Ray’s eyes light up. “Ah! Well! Then I would be happy to lend a hand. You won’t regret this.” A real smile, then, on Ray’s face, not just the regular one that he keeps around for show. Patrick pats him on the shoulder.

“You know, the closet probably really needs it. I just threw everything in there when I got here, and some of it is still in boxes.” He hadn’t known how long he would be staying, was the thing. It hadn’t made sense to take things out of boxes if he was going to leave again soon.

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“Just don’t throw anything out.” Patrick tries to think if there’s anything embarrassing or incriminating in his closet, but he doesn’t think so. He left all the pictures of him and Rachel behind. There’s nothing in there Ray doesn’t already know about him: baseball stuff, music stuff, boring clothes, books.

Ray spends that Saturday doing it, making so many crashing sounds that Patrick’s afraid to go upstairs. More than once, he hears power tools. He winces and watches tv in the living room, hoping that nothing will be broken by the time he’s done. Eventually, quite a few hours later, Ray comes halfway down the steps and leans out over the banister to call to Patrick.

“Ready to come and see?” he asks. Patrick braces himself and heads upstairs.

“I thought you might like to have more access to your books, since you could probably use them for the store,” Ray says, offhandedly, as they go up the stairs, and Patrick’s glad he’s behind Ray so that Ray can’t see the surprise on his face. It’s almost the exact same thought he had himself.

“That’s . . . thoughtful,” Patrick says.

“And I made sure to put the things you wear more often in more easily accessible places,” Ray adds. Patrick thinks about Ray seeing him every day for months, learning over time which are his favourite clothes and shoes. It shouldn’t be a shock that Ray knows this about him, but it is.

When Ray finally throws open the door to the closet, though, those little shocks seem like nothing in comparison.

“This is amazing,” he breathes, without thinking about it. Beside him, Ray beams.

“It’s actually such a large closet, it’s a pity we weren’t making good use of it before.”

Patrick had packed it full with all his stuff, all the stuff he hadn’t needed immediately, but Ray has unpacked him. Ray has installed shelves, and taken all of his books out of boxes and arranged them
neatly. He did it wrong, of course, organizing alphabetically by author’s family name, whereas Patrick likes his books organized by subject matter first and then by author’s family name, but still. There are new baskets and organizers to keep stuff separate: Patrick can see the space for all of his sheet music and guitar picks and extra strings, and the space for his glove oil and mitt and lucky baseball, and the section at the back for his winter coats and sweaters, which he wasn’t sure he’d ever need to break out, here in Schitt’s Creek.

It was conveniently organized before, in a way, for someone who might leave at any moment and might as well keep stuff in boxes, ready to go. Now it’s conveniently organized for someone who’s going to stay, someone who belongs here, someone who will eventually need a winter coat and a toque.

Patrick reaches out and touches the little basket full of gloves and scarves. It sinks in: he’s going to spend the winter here.

“Thank you, Ray,” he says, feeling choked up. “This is definitely going to speed up my efficiency in the mornings.”

“Perhaps you could say as much on Yelp,” Ray suggests, and Patrick laughs.

“Sure thing.”

*  

“So, I was looking at your friends and family list,” David says, as they do last-minute paint touch-ups. The soft open is two days away, and David wants everything to look perfect. Patrick does too, really. He likes that David is a perfectionist, and cares about the details, even though he can never remember to call the electrician.

“Okay,” Patrick says. He’d put on Ronnie and Karen and Ray, of course, and Jeff and Emily and Scout, a few other people from his baseball team, a couple of clients he’s worked with extensively. It hadn’t been a long list, but he felt good about it.

“There’s no family on it,” David says. Patrick looks up from the computer.

“Yeah, I—my family lives pretty far away, David.”

“Oh.” David’s voice is soft, like he wants to say more, but is worried about upsetting him.

“It’s fine,” he adds.

“Did you talk to them about the store?”

Patrick tries to think about it. He’s talked to his mom and dad on the phone a couple of times since moving here, and he’s texted with them now and again, so they wouldn’t worry and wouldn’t ask him when he was coming home (as much). Mostly, he asked them for their news, or told them his job was boring and that he was staying in a boring town. Which town, they asked? He pretended not to see those texts.

“I don’t know if I’ve really talked to them at length since I went into business with you,” he says. It’s actually only been a matter of weeks since the grant money came through, even though Patrick was helping out at the store long before that.

He used to talk to them all the time. He hasn’t given it much thought, but now he realizes that he’s been feeling more and more like talking to them is a chore, a task to check off the list, rather than a
pleasure. Not even an annoyance, like David feels with his family, which would at least be something, something fond and close. He doesn’t know how to talk to them, anymore, now that there’s so much about him they don’t know.

He wishes, for a moment, that his dad had been in the store in the last few weeks like Alexis was, making a nuisance of himself and giving ridiculous advice.

“Oh,” David says again. “So you’re not close with them, then.”

“I’m—I used to be,” he says. “I am. We just don’t talk as much since I moved.”

David nods, a little too hard, for a little too long. “You’re proud of this place. Right?”

Patrick frowns. “I’m, yeah, David, I’m really proud of it. You know that.”

“Then—okay, I know it’s not my business, but maybe you should tell your family about it. Let them be proud of you too. I didn’t really talk to my parents for a long time either, but now that I do, I mean, I hate them and they’re utter monsters, but I’m glad they’re going to see this thing I built, once it’s done. I never built anything before, not on my own. I had nothing for them to be proud of. Now that I do, I want them to see it.”

Nodding, Patrick licks his lips. He knows that, for David, there’s an element of proving himself to his parents in there, proving that he could’ve done it all along, maybe. Patrick wonders if the store could be the same for him, could prove to his parents that he’s okay.

“Maybe I’ll send them some pictures. Opening day.”

David smiles at him, then, his posture relaxing. “That’s a good idea.”

Patrick spends the rest of the day thinking about the fact that David was emotionally invested in Patrick’s parents being proud of him. He finds himself smiling at the walls as they paint, so much that David eventually laughs and asks him what he’s smiling at.

“Just excited for the opening,” Patrick says, which is at least also true.

“Aw,” David says. Patrick smiles more.

The next day is hectic, task after task piling up in advance of the launch, which is why it’s annoying when David texts him that some products were misdelivered to the motel and asks him to pick them up.

Patrick: Like we needed more stuff to do today

David: I know. Do you mind? I’m still in Elmdale buying this stupid till tape stuff

So Patrick swings by the motel and walks into the main office to look for Stevie, to get her to help him find the missing products, and is surprised to encounter David’s parents there instead.

He shouldn’t be surprised; they live in the motel, after all, and David had said that Stevie and Mr Rose were business partners. Back when he was looking David up, Patrick got used to seeing their faces crop up in his search results too, in magazines and online gossip sites, and it’s weird to see them as real people, standing in a dingy motel office.
Not that Mrs Rose’s outfit feels all that real. Patrick sees where David gets his dress sense from. It’s kind of sweet, he thinks, that he dresses in the same dramatic black and whites she’s wearing now. *Monochrome*, he thinks David would call it.

“Oh, hello,” Mr Rose says, turning to him. “Can I help you?”

“No,” Patrick says immediately, and Mr Rose’s brow furrows. Patrick’s struck by how much David looks like him, how David’s a younger version of him but just . . . softer. Patrick likes both of David’s parents immediately, wants to like them both immediately, and he realizes that it’s for no other reason than that they remind him of David.

He tries not to follow that thought too far, and clears his throat.

“I mean, yes,” he adds, “but I’m not here for a room. I’m Patrick Brewer, I’m David’s business partner.” He holds out his hand, and Mr Rose shakes it with a firm, practiced business grip, so unlike David’s warm clasp or Alexis’s turned hand that dares you to kiss it.

“Aha! Good to meet you, Patrick. Johnny Rose, my wife Moira.”

Mrs Rose doesn’t come closer or offer her hand to shake, but she smiles briefly from her spot near the counter and does an odd little half-wave-half-curtsy. Patrick tries to wave back.

“I . . . know who you are,” Patrick says; then, to avoid spitting out something honest, like *I saw you in People magazine while I was obsessively looking up pictures of your son*, he hastily adds, “Your son is very much like you both.”

Mr Rose smiles perfunctorily at this, probably because he gets that all the time, but Mrs Rose seems to brighten. “Yes! Well. We gave David many gifts,” she replies.

“Oh God. David is so, so much like her.

“You . . . definitely did. Uh. Anyway, David wanted me to come and pick up some boxes that were delivered here by mistake. You wouldn’t happen to know where those are, would you?”

“Right, the boxes,” Mr Rose says, and disappears into the back room.

“Should I come and help, or . . . ?” Patrick calls after him.

“I’ve got it!” Mr Rose replies, muffled, from the back. “Just a minute.” There’s a thudding noise, followed by a crashing noise. Patrick suppresses a wince.

“Perhaps you had better go with him, young Phillip,” Mrs Rose says.

“It’s, uh, Patrick,” Patrick says, and hurries into the back, where Mr Rose is trying to lift three boxes at once.

“Let me just—give you a hand, here, Mr Rose,” he says.

“Of course, of course,” Mr Rose says, just as genial and cheerful as he’d been when he said he didn’t need help. Together, they get the boxes out to Patrick’s car and loaded up.

“Well, thank you for your help, sir,” Patrick says.

“No trouble at all, no trouble at all,” Mr Rose enthuses. “We’re all so excited about the store. It’s nice to see David care about something so much.”
Thinking back over what David said about his galleries, Patrick’s stuck for a moment for a way to respond to this.

“It’s good that his family is supporting him,” he says eventually, diplomatically. Whatever they’ve done in the past, it’s clear from the way David talks about them that they’re present in his life, now, in a way they weren’t back then. In a good way. All of David’s stories are full of the both of them, and not just because they live next door at the motel.

Patrick remembers when he felt that close to his family, that exasperation and love that he hears in David’s voice sometimes. He misses it. David was right; he needs to tell his own parents about the store.

Mr Rose’s expression darkens, though, and Patrick wonders if he’s said something wrong.

“Well, there was a time, you know, when we were too supportive, maybe,” he says. “Or else supportive in the wrong way. Didn’t let him make his own mistakes. I’ve been trying to stay out of this whole store business, but I do worry that he’s going to mess up without any guidance.”

Ah. “You don’t have to worry,” Patrick says, feeling a little protective of David. “He’s got a good head for it. And also, he has me.” He doesn’t think about it as it comes out of his mouth, but once it has, he realizes it’s a bit much, and a sentiment he could never express directly to David.

“Does he,” Mr Rose replies, thoughtfully. Man, Patrick thought it was a big deal when David deployed an eyebrow, but on Mr Rose it’s even more dramatic.

“I mean, as his business partner.”

“Right, right.”

Patrick wonders, suddenly, mind racing, if Mr Rose was always supportive of David’s sexuality, or if it took him some time to process. He wonders if David grew up always having that assurance, that there was at least one thing his family would never disown him over, or if it was something he had to work at.

He wonders if Mr Rose is perceptive enough to see right through him, to see Patrick’s pathetic little crush on his son, even when David’s not in the room.

They sort of nod at each other, Patrick getting gradually more sure that Mr Rose knows he wants to be more than David’s business partner. Shit.

And then Mr Rose, face twisted with anxiety, says, “You know, we used to run a business. Rose Video.”

“I . . . know that,” Patrick says. He considers telling him that he used to work for one, but Mr Rose seems to be leading up to something.

“My financial manager, Eli Thomson, I worked with him every day. Moira and I went on vacations with him and his wife. We had them over for holidays. Even to family Thanksgiving, every October back when David was little. I considered him a brother.”

Patrick nods, frowns, confusion replacing his anxiety. This is not going quite where he thought it was. “I heard about what happened. I know he, uh.” He can’t think of a polite, first-acquaintance, talking-to-a-sixty-year-old way to say screwed you over.

“He screwed us over,” Mr Rose says, vehemently. “Yeah! And so, you know, when I see my son,
starting his own business, throwing in with someone he, no offense, Patrick, no offense, but that he barely knows—well, I worry.”

“I get that,” Patrick says, as understanding dawns, feeling a surge of sympathy. “You want to protect him.”

“Yeah,” Mr Rose sighs. “Just—don’t hurt my boy, Patrick. It’s his first business, his first real one, at least. He needs a real partner. A brother.”

Well. That answers Patrick’s question about whether Mr Rose is on to him.

“I can—try—to be a brother to him,” Patrick manages to say, swallowing down every not-at-all-fraternal feeling he’s had about David. “I promise you, Mr Rose, I have no ill intentions. I’m excited to be part of this business. I want it to succeed.”

“Well. I guess we’ll find out,” Mr Rose replies. He’s looking Patrick over again, a gleam in his eye. “And if you do decide to screw him over, you’d better be as good as Eli was at evading the police and fleeing to the Caymans.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Patrick says, then can’t resist adding, “Only the most artfully planned and ingenious fraud schemes for your son.”

“Ha ha,” Mr Rose says, making it clear that the joke didn’t land. David maybe got his sense of humour from his mother. Or, like. A stork.

“Well.” Patrick says. “Thanks again. For helping with the boxes.”

“You’re very welcome,” Mr Rose says, his smile clear and unshadowed, all genial professionalism once again. “We’ll see you at the launch tomorrow.”

“Looking forward to it,” Patrick says, and despite this weird, mildly threatening conversation, he finds that he is; he finds he’s looking forward to seeing David and his parents together, to seeing all of them as a family. To seeing Mr Rose look at David with that same fierce protectiveness and pride.

He drives the rosehip lotion and eucalyptus under-eye serum back to the store, trying to distract himself from his feelings by thinking through his checklist. David is great at the large-scale stuff, ideas, the overall vision, but Patrick’s starting to see that he’s not as good at remembering details. He has to check again whether David called the electrician, and if he didn’t, he needs to find himself some YouTube tutorials.

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There’s no time to think before the soft open starts; customers are lining up outside while Patrick’s finishing the lights, stocking last-minute products, putting out the wine and cupcakes, finishing the computer inventory database, and half a dozen other things, making him feel even more time pressure than he already does. He’s glad of it, actually. If he didn’t have anything to do, and if there were no clear deadline enforced by people outside impatiently checking the time on their phones, he thinks he would’ve lost it entirely. As it is, by the time David gets back from last-minute errands, he’s achieved an outward calm and an inner sense of . . . almost pure anticipation, excitement, like he can feel that this is going to be good.

He’s only ever felt this way before in the lead-up to a great game or a great open mic night, the way he feels when clarity strikes and he realizes that he’s going to play really, really well. To have that same feeling, that confidence, for his work is an unexpected joy.
David flips the sign, and the chaos begins. Patrick smiles. He keeps smiling; he can’t stop. He finds himself smiling the whole time, delighted to see all these people in the store he and David built together. David’s in his element, chatting with customers and talking up their products, so Patrick mostly stays behind the register to ring people up after David’s told them how gorgeous they look in a cat hair scarf or how perfect those candles will be for a little relaxation.

He looks up, every now and again, occasionally catching David’s eye. Every time, David’s smiling at him, like he can’t help it either, and Patrick smiles back, and it feels like a zing of energy crosses the room between them.

The line at the register gets really long as the night wears on and more people start to buy things; Patrick goes from customer to customer to customer without much of a break, though he can’t say he minds the money adding up in the till or all the compliments that people have for the store. He rings up a stick-pencil for that hot vet guy, who’s clearly too polite to object to the price, and then looks up for the next customer and sees David instead. There’s no one behind him; they’ve finally hit a lull, although the store is still packed and it’ll start up again soon enough.

“You haven’t had a break in an hour,” he says, holding out a plastic cup of wine. “Let me take over.”

“Who’ll work the floor?” Patrick asks. He takes the wine immediately, because he is both tired and thirsty and David is a godsend. His fingers brush David’s as he does so, and he feels it again, that little zing.

He wonders whether that energy is going to dissipate, like it always has before, with their flirting. He wants to know, very badly, what might happen if it were to build, instead, crackling into something else.

On a night like tonight, it feels like anything is possible.

“You will. It’s less stressful on the body to move around, as opposed to standing in one place.”

“Worked a lot of retail?” Patrick asks, taking a generous sip of wine. A gulp, some might call it.

“Mmm, some, actually? But no, this knowledge comes to you from my short-lived and ill-advised modeling career. It was not as fun as it looks, for many reasons, but one of the things I detested most was the standing still.”

Patrick processes this information. He wonders what kind of modeling David means. “Wow,” he drawls, covering up his sincere surprise. “You trust me out on the floor, with the customers?”

“Well, you are just the numbers guy,” David agrees gravely. “But you’ve spent enough time around me and around the merchandise that I think you’ll do fine.”

Patrick glows a little at that, thinking that David trusts him, not just with sales projections and inventory spreadsheets, but with the store itself.

He finishes his wine.

“Deeply touched by your faith in me, David,” Patrick says, and he means it, even though he says it in a sarcastic way.

David quirks his lips, like maybe he knows when Patrick’s being secretly sincere, and shoos him out from behind the counter.
“Well this was a success,” David says, turning to him after the last customer finally leaves the store. Patrick can’t stop noticing the sweater he’d chosen for tonight, fuzzy white and black, how soft and inviting it looks.

*I could kiss him,* Patrick thinks, just like he thought it with Ben up on the trail. With Ben, it’d been low-stakes, a stranger who didn’t know him; with David, everything’s different. Everything’s a risk.

He could hug David instead, maybe. He offers the thought to himself like a sacrifice, intended to placate the restless, desiring energy that’s been building in him all night. A hug would be a normal thing for him to do, after a night like this. He starts planning it, opening his arms, stepping towards David, saying congratulations. He could do that.

“I would say so, yeah. Although, you know, we’d be twenty-five percent richer if we’d just done a hard launch, but hey, I’m just the numbers guy.”

David, of course, can’t let his point lie, and has to argue with him.

“Mm-hmm. Um, but had we not done the soft launch, we might not have lured all those people.” He makes little come-hither motions with his arms to emphasize the luring. Patrick feels lured. He sets down his wine glass deliberately. A hug, he tells himself. He can do it. A hug doesn’t say anything more than friendship.

He turns back to David and raises his hands, intending to stop the bickering there. “Well, you know, the best thing is, we never have to talk about it again, because we’re officially open.”

“That is true,” David agrees.

Patrick takes two steps forward, opening his arms, just like he planned. David opens his, making space for Patrick to come in and hug him. “Congratulations, man,” Patrick says.

“Congratulations to you.” David’s warm, his stubble a little prickly, as he pulls Patrick in close. He does a backpat or two, and Patrick does a backpat or two, and that’s when most guy hugs would stop. But Patrick’s had some practice breaking his old guy hug habit, thanks to Ray, and he lets himself hang on tight instead of letting go and stepping back. David’s chest feels good against his, broad and firm under that soft sweater.

He feels David’s hands move down his back, rubbing instead of patting, and Patrick feels the energy between them shifting. He could lean back from this embrace and put his mouth on David’s.

He doesn’t.

The lights start to flicker.

Patrick pulls away, taking the excuse to look up at the lights, to not look at David.

“I can fix that,” he says.

“Okay, yeah, I was just gonna say that that might . . . need fixing,” David agrees. He sounds as awkward as Patrick feels. Patrick’s glad, all of a sudden, that he didn’t try anything more. David’s hands on his back were . . . but no, he was probably just about to pull away from the hug.

Patrick gets the toolkit and fixes the lights while David cleans up all the little plastic wine glasses and tidies the store back up.
“Ready to head out?” he asks, when the lights are working again. He thinks he did it right this time. He really should call an electrician.

David’s still tinkering at the back, replenishing stock. “No, you go ahead. I’m gonna fix up a couple of things I noticed, before I forget.”

Patrick nods. They’re on the opposite sides of the store, now. It wouldn’t make any sense for him to walk over there, for him to touch David again.

“Okay,” he says, helplessly, across the distance. “Don’t stay too late.”

“I won’t,” David says, his back to Patrick.

Patrick leaves by himself in the dark.

*

When he gets home, he has a text from his mom—her regular Friday check-in—and remembers what David said about sharing some of his new life with them, remembers how proud and surprised Mr and Mrs Rose looked when they stepped through the door of Rose Apothecary earlier that evening. This, at least, he can share. So he sends her some of the pictures he took today: the contractors installing the sign; the store, immaculate, before they opened it; the store full of people. So, *I kind of tripped and fell and ended up co-managing a business*, he texts her. *This is Rose Apothecary. I’m very proud of it.*

His mother texts him back immediately, with lots of exclamation marks and hearts. *I didn’t know you were planning to open your own business!!!!!!!!!!*

**Patrick:** Well, I wasn’t, but I met this entrepreneur with a great idea and I just had to be a part of it. Today was our launch day.

**Mom:** Well it looks packed! Wow I am so proud of you. What does the store sell?

He texts back and forth with her for a while, explaining the business model. After a while, his dad jumps into the text chain as well, asking exactly the kinds of questions that Patrick would’ve found annoying if he’d asked them in the lead-up to the opening. He tells them all about it, feeling for the first time in a long time that he’s enjoying his conversation with them, that he’s telling them something real.

**Mom:** So who’s your business partner? It’s not that gorgeous girl spraying perfume in the picture, is it?

Startled, Patrick looks back at the picture he sent; sure enough, Alexis is in it, sampling some of the unisex colognes for Mrs Rose. She does, to his mom’s credit, look like a salesperson talking to a customer.

**Patrick:** No. My business partner’s name is David. He’s the dark-haired guy holding up a scarf in the left side of the photo.

**Mom:** Oh, too bad! She’s cute.

**Dad:** Marcy, enough, Patrick’s trying to tell us about his new business.

**Patrick:** That’s okay.
He sends them a few more pictures, and chats a little while longer. It’s nice; it’s better than it’s felt in a long time. But he can’t stop thinking about his mother’s first reaction to David: *too bad.*

* 

Hiking the next morning doesn’t clear his head. He felt so good, holding David last night. But the store felt good, too, and he doesn’t want to jeopardize that. It’s a risk, a bigger risk than any of the ones he’s taken lately, because he finally has so much to lose: the store, David’s friendship. If he took a shot and David said no, he’s not sure how he’d deal with it. Every time David’s in the room with him, he feels the same rollercoaster of nauseated excitement, but what if David doesn’t feel that way about him?

As he walks back down the slope, he decides that the easier thing is to keep things as they are, for now, to go into work and try to see David as just his business partner.

Once he gets far enough down, his phone gets reception again, and bings with a few texts. His mom, saying how nice it was to chat the night before; Ray, asking him to pick up some forms at Town Hall; David, saying that he decided to go in early, so no rush in getting there; and one from Joon-ho.

The fact that he has a text from Joon-ho is more shocking than the idea of David waking up early to get things done at the store, which Patrick briefly thinks must mean he’s still really, really excited from their success the night before. But he has to skip past that emotion to land on Joon-ho’s text.

*I could meet, like, now, at the cafe. If you still wanted to.*

Patrick texts furiously, estimating how long it’ll take him to shower and change and get downtown. He tells Joon-ho he’ll be there in half an hour, and he texts David to say that, actually, he has an emergency meeting and he’ll be late.

He’d planned on getting in to the store early, too, to make sure all the stock was replenished and everything was ready. Also, he’d secretly had his doubts about David’s ability to get there on time. He mutters a heartfelt *thank you* to David for being able to cover his back.

When he gets to the café, it’s pretty busy with the morning breakfast crowd, so it takes Patrick a while to spot Joon-ho sitting in one of the booths by himself. He sits down across from him.

“Hey,” he says.

Joon-ho smiles. “Hey. Sorry I didn’t reply to you for like . . . forever. I kept going back and forth.”

“That’s okay.”

“I just—I guess I wanted someone to talk it over with, someone who isn’t my family or one of my grad school friends. And you’re like . . . older.”

Patrick’s conservative estimate is that he’s about three years older than Joon-ho, but he’s not surprised by the assumption. Everyone has always thought he was younger than his actual age when they first met him, and then thought he was older than his actual age once they got to know him. It’s annoying, but not unexpected. It’s how he’s always ended up in this kind of situation before; among his old friends group, he was always the one giving advice, acting as a sounding board, calming people down, breaking up fights. At least, before he got too depressed to talk to anyone anymore, he was. It occurs to him for the first time that he really needed someone to give him advice and act as a sounding board, back then, and there wasn’t really anyone he felt he could go to.

He hopes he can help Joon-ho out, be the friend for him that he wishes he’d had.
“I guess I wear a lot of button-up shirts,” Patrick agrees. Joon-ho laughs. “Seriously, I’m thirty-one, but I can definitely be an outside perspective for you.”

“Even though you’re friends with Ray?”

“I hope so. I talked to Ray about talking to you. We agreed that we both wanted to check in on how you were doing. But I didn’t tell him I’d heard back from you, and I won’t tell him anything about our meeting if you don’t want me to.”

Joon-ho sighs. “Thanks.”

Twyla comes over to take their order, so they’re interrupted for a minute. When she leaves, there’s an awkward silence between them.

“So how are you doing?” Patrick tries.

“I’m, uh, miserable?” Joon-ho says breezily, then grimaces. “Yeah. Miserable.”

Patrick frowns. “Sorry to hear it. Is it—because of the breakup?”

Sighing, Joon-ho shrugs. “I guess. I miss him. Also grad school sucks, and I hate it.”

“Ah, so you’re using the patented ’sticking with the thing you hate and getting rid of the thing you like’ life strategy. Smart. Done that one myself.”

“I know, right? What could possibly go wrong.”

“Did you like grad school before? Or like your major?”

“I mean, I like the work. I like the on-the-ground, rubber-meets-the-road, sociolinguistics stuff. It’s the school that sucks. My adviser is a complete dick.”

“Damn,” Patrick says. “Is it—how bad is it? This is annoying but I’ll stick it out bad, or you should think about quitting bad?”

“Well, you see, if I did quit, I’d be a huge academic disappointment, on top of all the other kinds of disappointment I already am.”

“You’re talking about your family?” Patrick hazards.

“Yeah. My parents acted like I’d murdered them when I first went into linguistics in undergrad, but they calmed down quick and got pretty supportive. And then I came out to them, and they didn’t take that well either at first, so at this point it kind of feels like I’ve run out of free passes, you know?”

Patrick doesn’t know, but he can imagine. He figures he used up all of his own free passes when he called it off with Rachel and fled the area. “Yeah,” he says, trying not to look away. “So, quitting grad school would be free pass number three. Or else Ray would be free pass number three.”

“Bad enough it’s a man, but someone fourteen years older? A realtor? It’s not gonna fly.”

“I mean. They got over the linguistics thing and the . . . liking men thing, right? Probably because they care about you.”

“But like. At what point would confessing this to them actually kill them, instead of just figuratively? The way my mother talks about it, I think it’s a real concern.”
Patrick smiles ruefully. He tries not to think of his own parents, of his mother pushing him to date a random girl she saw in a photo, just because she was a girl, and nearby.

“So they have no idea about Ray at all?”

Joon-ho puts his face in his hands, then draws his hands away slowly. “Not really. Ugh. I know. I told them I was dating someone, but no details. Ray never pushed to meet them, because he’s really sweet and thinks I’m made of glass.”

Patrick grimaces, not sure what to say to all of that. “He just wants to look after you,” he tries, eventually.

Twyla comes back with Patrick’s tea and Joon-ho’s coffee.

“I know that. But maybe that’s the problem, too. He was kind of . . . too accommodating. Like, he’d bend over backwards to make sure we did whatever I wanted, and pretend it was fine with him, as if I’d leave if he sneezed. But then other times it’s like he wasn’t even thinking about me, or taking my opinion into account. It’s like. He assumed I’d leave eventually, so he didn’t act like he was in it for good. And meanwhile all my friends were telling me he was way too old for me and that it would never be a real relationship, and I—got depressed about it. I mean, they were right. He didn’t take me seriously as a partner. Where was it going to go?”

Patrick remembers Ray saying, early on, that he thought his relationship with Joon-ho would be fun while it lasted. He wonders if, even then, Ray was trying to prepare himself for it to fail. And if he spent the whole time being nice to Joon-ho, without ever being real, well, that wouldn’t help either.

“Did you talk to him about any of that?”

Joon-ho takes a slow sip of his coffee. “I tried? Admittedly, I sucked at it. And Ray’s not the best at listening to critique, you know?”

Patrick nods ruefully, because Ray has not always been great at respecting his roommate boundaries. He has no idea what to say to that; he’s Ray’s friend and all, but he can’t pretend that he’s blameless in this, or that everything could be fixed if they got back together.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” he says, eventually. “I have . . . no good advice. Follow your heart?”

“My heart is going in every direction at once,” Joon-ho drawls. “I really wouldn’t rely on it.”

Sighing, Patrick sips his tea. “I mean,” he says, slowly. “I can tell you what I know. I got out of a really bad relationship—like, bad for me, I mean. I was miserable there. And I wanted to go back a lot, at first. I almost did.”

“So, you’re saying I should stay broken up with Ray.”

“No, I’m saying it was right for me to stay broken up with Rachel.”

Joon-ho’s eyebrows go up. “You date girls?” It’s like when Ronnie said finally at Patrick’s first LGBTQ2AI-plus night, and Patrick feels a fleeting annoyance that apparently everyone knew he was gay except for him.

“I don’t anymore,” Patrick says, and it’s as close as he’s come to saying it right out to anyone, that he’s gay, not bi or pan or queer. Even that little half-confession feels good.

Patrick ducks his head, feeling seen: it doesn’t help that Twyla comes around then with their food, and he coughs and sits back self-consciously before looking up at her.

“Thanks, Twyla.”

“Thanks,” Joon-ho echoes. Twyla asks them if they need anything else, and they tell her no, waiting for their privacy to return. When it does, neither of them start eating. Patrick tries to feel his way through what he wants to say.

“What I’m saying is, even when it should’ve been completely obvious to me that I shouldn’t go back, I still wanted to go back. Because I was miserable, because I hadn’t fixed . . . fixed the underlying issue. So, do you miss Ray because you miss Ray, or do you miss Ray because it feels like you don’t have any other options, because the rest of your life sucks right now?”

Joon-ho thinks about this for a while, occupied with his bacon. Patrick digs into his eggs while he waits, nervous. He feels like such a hypocrite; he’s never even kissed another man. Who is he to give Joon-ho advice?

“Good question,” Joon-ho says, eventually. “I mean, my department is really shitty. And a lot of my grad school friends are straight people, by necessity, so. They’re nice, but. Really really straight. There’s one lesbian I like.”

“Sounds grim,” Patrick agrees, dryly. He thinks, not for the first time, how odd it was that he fell in with so many queer people once he came to Schitt’s Creek. Like he knew what he was looking for, on some level. Like it was here waiting for him.

“So maybe I’m just sad and pretending like getting back together with Ray will fix it.”

Patrick shrugs. “Maybe.”

“You have to be so fucking cryptic?”

“Maybe.” Patrick starts to sip his tea mysteriously, but stops to laugh when Joon-ho kicks him under the table.

“If I go to Ray, and talk to him about what I want to change, do you think he might actually do it this time?”

“Honestly, Joon-ho, I think he’d do anything to have you back. I think he’s realized that . . .” Patrick pauses to think. “I think he’s realized that he was in it a lot deeper than he was letting himself believe. Not that you should have to break up with him to get him to listen to you, but—”

“But maybe it’s worth a shot this once.” Joon-ho sighs. “Might be harder to break up with him a second time, though. If I need to.”

“If you need to, come talk to me again, and I’ll help you. I’m great at sequential breakups.”

Joon-ho watches him for a moment, then asks, “What did you do? When you wanted to break up with Rachel.”

Patrick hasn’t talked about her with anyone in Schitt’s Creek, but he thinks it might help Joon-ho out, so he takes a deep breath. “Usually, I told her it was over for good, spent two days feeling great about it, two days crying in the bathtub, four months trying to date other people, then finally
answered her texts and took her back.”

It’s not surprising, really, that Rachel is still occasionally texting him in the hope that they’ll get back together. She has good reason to think it’ll work. This is the pattern he’s rewarded, in the past.

“Usually? And so, the last time?”

“I moved. Here.”

Joon-ho whistles. “You didn’t fuck around.”

“Eventually,” Patrick agrees. “I did fuck around for a really long time, though.”

“Cheers to eventually not fucking around anymore,” Joon-ho proposes, holding up his mug. Patrick clinks it with his own.

“So what’s so terrible about your linguistics department?” he asks. Joon-ho tells him, and Patrick is increasingly glad he never went to grad school, because it sounds like hell.

“Could you try changing advisers?” Patrick asks. He has no idea how it works, but it sounds like mostly one asshole at the center of the problems. Joon-ho seesaws his hand.

“I could. It’s major drama if I do, though.”

“Sounds like it’s major drama if you don’t, but in that case you’re the only one who’s feeling it. Is there someone there you trust, who you could talk to about the process, what it would look like? So you could figure out the steps and the timeline? How it’d affect your work? Then you could make an informed decision.”

Nodding slowly, Joon-ho swallows a bite of food. “That’s not a bad idea. I was kind of avoiding it because it felt too . . . too big, you know? Too drastic.”

Patrick smiles. “You sound like my sister,” Joon-ho says, smiling back. “She’s organized, like you are.” Then he breaks into a story about going to the circus with his sister, when they were kids, that makes Patrick kind of want to meet her, because she sounds amazing. He responds with a story of his own, about being disappointed by the unnecessarily chaotic environment on his first day of kindergarten and trying to reschedule his playtime, which makes Joon-ho laugh, and then between one story and another, they finish their breakfast.

It feels like they’re becoming friends, or that they could be; Patrick thinks they get each other, in a lot of ways.

“Hey, man, thanks for meeting up with me,” Joon-ho says, after they pay the bill. “I feel—like it’s all still really messed up, but at least maybe I understand why it’s messed up, now.”

“If you really want to be with Ray, and he’s ready to take your relationship seriously, then don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. You two are really cute together. And a very competitive Pictionary team.”

“Ha. I miss the Pictionary. You ever try to play Pictionary with linguists? It gets out of hand.”

They stand to leave, and walk out the door more or less together. Patrick smiles as he sees the Rose Apothecary sign up where it belongs. Joon-ho notices the direction of his gaze.
“Hey, is that your store? It’s open now, right? Someone in the café was talking about it this morning.”

“Yeah, we opened last night,” Patrick says. “Big success.”

“Shit, I shouldn’t be taking you away from it,” Joon-ho says. “Can I come see?”

Patrick feels suddenly cold, even in the warm summer sun. What would David think of Joon-ho, if Patrick walked in with him, chatting and laughing? What might Joon-ho say to David, or in front of him? Patrick had told him so many . . . not secrets, not really, but things he doesn’t want to share yet.

Joon-ho doesn’t act all that gay, Patrick thinks, then hates himself for thinking it.

“Sure,” he says, forcing his voice to sound easy, casual. “But, uh, David—my business partner—doesn’t know all that much about . . . what we’ve been discussing.”

“Not out at work, got it,” Joon-ho says. Patrick frowns, but doesn’t correct him; it’ll do.

They go in, and David raises an immediate eyebrow. Patrick lets Joon-ho wander the store and joins David at the counter.

“Thanks for covering,” he says, first, because he really does feel bad he wasn’t here for their first morning.

“It was so delightfully unexpected for me to be here early in the morning and you to be late that I almost didn’t mind.” David says. Then he collapses, leaning on his arms on the counter in despair. “But I do mind, please tell me you brought me something.”

Patrick hands over the cinnamon bun he’d gotten to go. He’s noticed that they’re David’s favourite. David peeks in the bag and smiles, which makes Patrick feel so disproportionately pleased with himself that he has to push the feeling down to hear what David says next.

“So this was your emergency meeting?” he asks, eyes darting towards Joon-ho. His voice sounds a little tighter than usual. That makes sense, if David thought he was missing work to hang out with a friend.

“Yeah.” Patrick lowers his voice; Joon-ho’s back browsing among the throw pillows and shouldn’t be able to hear them. “Joon-ho. He’s Ray’s ex-boyfriend. Needed someone to talk to.”

David’s jaw drops. “Ray’s . . . ex-boyfriend,” he says.

Patrick just nods seriously, enjoying the flummoxed look on David’s face, like he’s not sure what to say first.

“He’s cute,” David says at last, sort of grudgingly. “I hope Ray’s begging him to come back.”

“Ray’s too sweet to do that,” Patrick replies. “Believe it or not, he has morals.”

“Ah, so he sent you.”


“Hey, let me get one of these sweaters,” Joon-ho says, coming up to the counter with one of the alpaca-wool ones.

“Friends and family discount,” Patrick says to David, and David looks like he’s about to object, but
then purses his lips and rings it up.

“That’s really nice, thanks.” Joon-ho says, smiling first at Patrick, then at David.

“Um, would you like a receipt? Or a complimentary tote bag?” David asks, gesturing at the bags with his ringed fingers.

Joon-ho follows the gesture with his eyes, and after a second says, “No, I’m good, thanks.” He turns to Patrick, sweater in hand.

“Feel free to text if you wanna talk some more. Or like, hang out,” Patrick says. Then he says, “Oh,” as Joon-ho steps up and hugs him, gently. He hugs back, a little bemused, and pats him on the back.

He wants, badly, to look up at David, to make eye contact with David, to say or do something that will communicate to David that he is not interested in Joon-ho at all, but he has no idea how, so he just pats Joon-ho’s shoulder and tries not to blush and tries not to look anywhere in particular.

“Thanks for everything,” Joon-ho says, pulling back. “Maybe I’ll see you soon.”

“Pictionary,” Patrick agrees.

Joon-ho smiles and leaves.


“I got kind of invested in them as a couple, hanging around at Ray’s so much,” Patrick says, trying to downplay it.

“I can see that, yes.” David stands on tiptoe to peer out the window, at Joon-ho’s figure in the distance. “Isn’t he a little young for Ray?”

Patrick shrugs. “When it’s right, it’s right, you know?”

David huffs a laugh. “Yes, I definitely agree, based on my vast wealth of soulmate experiences.”

“Dunno about soulmates,” Patrick says, thoughtfully, looking out the window himself. He can’t bear to say it, if he’s looking at David, if he knows that David is looking at him. “But some people are right for each other.”

“Mmm,” David says, non-committally.

Patrick takes himself to the other side of the store and starts replenishing stock items, still not looking at David.

His phone buzzes in his pocket; when he pulls it out, he sees it’s a text from Joon-ho.

Pretty sure you can tell David you’re gay, it says. I get the sense that he’d be fine with it. The text is followed by a series of crying-laughing emojis.

Shut up, Patrick texts back. He just gets more crying-laughing emojis in response.

* *

Patrick comes home from the store a couple of days later to find Joon-ho and Ray sitting together in the living room, in different chairs but leaning in towards one another, obviously deep in conversation.
“Oh,” Patrick says, “Uh.”

“Hey, Patrick,” Joon-ho says, looking up at him and smiling. “Good to see you again.”

“You too,” Patrick agrees.

Ray looks over his shoulder at Patrick. “Hello, Patrick.”

“Hi, Ray.” Patrick thinks about the leftovers in the fridge he was planning on eating, and the documentary he was planning on watching, and the blankets he was planning on cuddling up under with his book. “Uh, I was just stopping in to get a couple of things.” He looks around and grabs his messenger bag, which he thinks has some supplies in it, like a granola bar or something, at least. “Which I now have. On my way back out. Won’t be back till late.”

Joon-ho stifles a laugh. “Have a nice night, Patrick. Say hi to David for me.”

“Fuck you, Joon-ho,” Patrick calls back, as he heads out the door, and neither Joon-ho nor Ray stifle their laughs that time.

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There’s a book in his messenger bag, so he could just camp out at the café and eat dinner by himself. He thinks about texting David, because Joon-ho wasn’t wrong to assume that was his first instinct, but he has no idea what he’d mean by it if he texted David and asked him to dinner. What if David thought it was a date? Patrick has decided to keep their relationship professional, at least for now, and he might mess that up if he invites him out.

It’s a good reason not to text David.

He tries Jeff, instead, texting Joon-ho and Ray are maybe getting back together?? And I want to give them space but have nowhere to go.

Jeff texts back a minute later, with heart-eyes and crying-laughing emojis. You can come over if you don’t mind leftovers and an overtired four year old.

Patrick texts back that he’s on his way, and Jeff texts his address, which is considerate of him, even though Patrick’s been there a couple times before for games night.

As he gets in his car, he gets another text from Jeff: Also Emily says you have to tell us the details about Joon-ho and Ray if you want to be fed.

Patrick grins, remembering what Karen told him at the barbecue. That people might talk about him, but only because they like him, and want to imagine nice things for him. It might be fun to imagine nice things for Ray and Joon-ho.

When he gets there, he can hear screaming coming from inside; Emily opens the door, looking harried, and Patrick can see Jeff in the background chasing after Scout, who is naked from the waist down, with a pair of pants.

“Looks like quite a night you’re having,” Patrick says. Some of his friends back home got married young and had kids, so the scene isn’t entirely unfamiliar, but he’s still a little unsure about what to say.

“It’s every night these days. She doesn’t want to wear the training pants to go to sleep.” Emily gestures him into the house, then kisses him on the cheek. He smiles at her.
“I’m afraid I brought you nothing, because I had no idea I was coming over.” He spreads his empty hands. “Unless you want a granola bar that’s been riding around in this bag for a month.”

“Sounds delicious. Meanwhile I can offer you either kraft dinner with cut up hot dogs in it or some leftover chili we’ve been eating for the last three days.”

“Chili sounds amazing. Thank you for feeding me.” They’ve gotten to the kitchen, which is a bit of a disaster area; Patrick can see plenty of the aforementioned kraft dinner on several surfaces.

The screaming gets louder again, and Scout comes running into the room, stops dead when she sees Patrick, and gets suddenly shy. Jeff immediately manages to catch up to her, scoop her up, and make monster noises that distract her into giggles while he puts on her pants. Patrick’s amazed at his ability to move her around like that without dropping her, the ease with which he does it. He’s never felt entirely comfortable around kids, himself, never known how to talk to them. Part of it is lack of experience, he’s sure; all his cousins are older than him, except for Hallie, who was always so fearless and confident that she seemed older than she was.

“See? Totally comfy,” he says. Scout shakes her head in emphatic disagreement, but isn’t screaming anymore.

“Scout, you remember Patrick? You met him at the barbecue at Auntie Twyla’s.” Scout nods her head, her eyes on Patrick.

“Hi,” Patrick says. She slithers out of Jeff’s arms to the floor, then dashes off again, quietly this time, presumably towards her room. Jeff follows her.

“She’ll come back when she feels ready,” Emily says. “She likes to take time to think about things.”

“I can relate,” Patrick says.

“She says she wants to play with her animals by herself, daddy,” Jeff reports, coming back into the kitchen. “Hey, Patrick.”

Jeff gives Patrick a hug, which he’s not sure they’ve ever done before; for that matter, he doesn’t think Emily’s ever kissed him on the cheek before today. It’s their first time hanging out when they’re not at games night or bowling, so Patrick guesses it’s a friendship milestone.

“Good to see you,” Patrick says. “Is—wait, is Twyla really her aunt?” He can vaguely recall Twyla saying something about them being related, now that he thinks about it.

“Um, sort of? I think? Twyla’s my third cousin by marriage,” Jeff replies. “But we have a lot of aunts and uncles who aren’t related to us, too.”

“That’s good,” Patrick says, inanely. Not having hung out with the two of them alone, he’s suddenly at a loss for what to say.

“I’ll heat you up some chili,” Emily says, stepping into the silence. “So long as you tell us the gossip.”

“That was the deal,” Patrick agrees, sitting gingerly on a chair without spilled food on it.

“Beer?” Jeff offers, and Patrick nods. He gets three of them out and pops the tops. He kisses Emily’s cheek when he hands her a beer, easy and domestic. When he brings one to Patrick, Patrick nods his thanks.
“So? Ray and Joon-ho, huh?” Jeff asks.

“Looks like it. I mean, maybe. I think they’re gonna give it another try.”

“They’re good together,” Jeff says. “I hope it works.”

“I hope Ray sees how lucky he is,” Patrick says, by way of agreeing, and Emily looks over her shoulder at him, eyebrows raised.

“You think he didn’t?”

“I think if I were dating Joon-ho, I’d make damn sure not to let him go in the first place.”

“Oh really,” Jeff says, poking Patrick with a toe. “You’re not burning a torch for him, are you?”

Emily sets a bowl down in front of him, fragrant and steaming. “Thank you,” he says, looking up at her. “And, no. I just mean—I’ve gotten to know him a little. He’s a sweet guy.”

And thoughtful, and funny, and good-looking, Patrick adds, to himself, because it’s not like he hasn’t noticed. If Ray hadn’t—and if Joon-ho hadn’t—maybe Patrick would’ve asked him out, eventually. It’s an odd thought to have, the road not taken, that he might’ve dated Joon-ho instead of helping him reconcile with Ray. It didn’t even occur to him before, though, which is weird. It’s like the LGBTQ2AI-plus night, when he hadn’t asked anyone out, hadn’t even thought about asking anyone out.

“Oh-huh,” Jeff says. “I worry about sweet guys dating guys like Ray. I love him, but Ray’s kind of a steamroller.”

“You’re not wrong. I think that’s what they’re talking about now, in fact. Joon-ho’s tougher than he looks, though.”

“Well, that might have to be true, if they wanna make it work,” Emily says.

He blows on a spoonful of chili and takes a bite; it’s incredibly delicious. “Wow, this is amazing,” he says. “What do you put in here?”

“Chocolate and beer,” Jeff replies, promptly. “So you’re saying you walked in on them . . . talking? At Ray’s house?”

“Yes?” Patrick replies. “What did you think?” He immediately has the answer to what they thought when Emily grins and Jeff waggles his eyebrows at him.

“I mean, you seemed so certain that you should clear out of the entire house,” Emily laughs. “We had to assume it was because they were having sex on the kitchen counter.”

Patrick ducks his head. “No, no. Just—wanted to give them space to work things out. Um. Verbally.” Though now that she’s said it, Patrick wonders if they’re also going to have sex, and his mind provides an image of what that might look like. He forces the thought away.

Jeff grins. “That’s very sweet, then. Well, good for Ray for making a move. And good for Joon-ho for demanding better. It’s scary to tell someone what you want.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. His mouth feels dry, suddenly, despite the beer. He clears his throat. “Is that what worked for you two? Saying what you want?”

Emily laughs. “God, no. I danced around the fact that I was into him for, like, a year. We met when I
hired him to landscape the yard in front of my office; I kept telling myself I’d do it, but it’d been ages since I opened my practice and it was still all brown and scraggly and sad, so I gave up and called someone.”

“I didn’t know you did landscaping,” Patrick says, to Jeff. He nods.

“It’s how I met Ronnie. We work together, sometimes, her on the construction and me on the grounds. She got me my first real job in town, actually, a few years back.”

“And it took a year for you to, what, plant some trees? Were you delaying so you could hang around her some more?” Patrick tries a little teasing, which he hasn’t done with them outside of a competitive games context. They both grin, which makes Patrick feel glad.

“Who could blame me? But no, there were endless complications with the drainage, with buried unmarked cables—the job went on and on.”

“Most people would’ve thought you were dragging out the job to con her out of more money,” Patrick says. It’s what Patrick’s Uncle Doug would do.

“Oh, I accused him of that at one point,” Emily says. “Another part of the self-deception, where if I was mad at him maybe I wouldn’t have to acknowledge my other strong feelings for him.”

“So it was romance by threat of a civil suit,” Patrick laughs. “Sounds like a romcom.”

“Ugh. Didn’t feel like one,” Jeff says. Then he furrows his brow. “She’s been quiet for a long time,” he notes. Emily’s eyes dart back and forth, obviously listening for any tell-tale signs of destruction.

“Better go look,” Emily says, and Jeff nods and gets up from the table.

“So who ended up making the first move?” Patrick asks, wanting to hear the happy ending to this story. Emily grins.

“Jeff did. He looked up at me one day, waist-deep in a mud trench that had been open for three months at that point, absolutely filthy and bedraggled, and he said, ‘look, have we been flirting this whole time or what?’” She laughs, and Patrick laughs with her. “I’ll never forget that, he was just so overwhelmed and stressed out and frustrated and he couldn’t take it anymore. So I said, well, I don’t know about you, but I have! Kind of yelled it at him, actually.”

Patrick can picture it; it’s sweet, romantic. “And here you are now.”

“And here we are now,” Emily agrees. She gestures around the kitchen. “Still just as filthy as the day we first yelled our feelings at each other.”

Jeff pops his head back into the room. “Um. Hon. I may need your help with this one.”

Emily shoots an alarmed look at Patrick, then gets up.

“Sorry, Patrick,” Jeff says. “This might . . . take a little while. There’s been an incident with the toilet paper.”

“G’dammit, how does she keep getting into the cupboard,” Emily groans.

“G’dammit,” Scout shrieks, happily, from the other room. They both disappear down the hall, and Patrick is left by himself with an empty bowl. After a couple of minutes and a few more shrieks of laughter, he decides to make himself useful, and sets in on the sizable pile of dishes. Once they’re all
cleaned or put into the dishwasher, he wipes down the counters, table, chairs, and occasionally the floor, so that kraft dinner is no longer what David might call the dominant aesthetic.

Thinking that makes him think about David’s precision, his eye for detail, his careful cleanliness. He’d hate something like this, all this chaos. Patrick wonders if David sees himself ever having kids; his guess would be no.

And there’s a thought that a professional business partner doesn’t need to have, he reminds himself, as he sweeps up cheerios from off the floor. He’s just dumping the dust into the garbage when Jeff and Emily come back out, carrying an obviously freshly-bathed Scout.

“Sorry that took so long, we—oh my God,” Jeff says, looking around. “What did you do?”

Patrick shrugs. “Thought I’d work off my chili debt,” he says.

After the resulting hugs and surreptitious tears, they all settle down in the living room to play together with Scout. Patrick breaks out the Jenga, which was his favourite game as a kid, and he and Scout have fun making big “uh-oh!” faces every time one of them pulls out a block. She cackles wildly every time the tower doesn’t fall, and every time it does fall, in equal measure.

“You really don’t care, do you?” Patrick asks her. “You think it’s funny either way.”

“It’s really really funny,” Scout replies, biting her lip and pulling out one of the blocks. The tower doesn’t fall. She gags theatrically, then throws her head back and laughs. Patrick laughs too.

“What about you?” Emily asks from the couch, still nursing her beer. “You got anyone special?”

“No,” Patrick says, immediately, like a reflex. He takes a breath; he asked them about their history. It’s normal for them to ask him back. He can do this.

“Thinking about anyone special?” Jeff asks, teasingly. Patrick sighs.

“Maybe? I don’t know. And I have yet to see any mud trenches of destiny to encourage me along.”

“Everyone has their own mud trench,” Emily intones, wisely. “Do not miss yours when it presents itself, just because it isn’t the kind of mud trench you’re used to.”

Jeff rolls his eyes and elbows her. “You gonna talk to him? I’m assuming him?”

“Him,” Patrick affirms, and it feels good, still feels so good, just to say that general him. He pulls a Jenga block out of the tower, and it wobbles, and wobbles, but doesn’t fall. He and Scout raise their eyebrows and gasp and laugh. Then he turns back to Jeff. “I—it’s really unclear if I should. I don’t wanna mess everything up.”

“Yeah, I know that feeling,” Jeff says. “I remember back in university, I had this huge crush on a girl on my softball team. This is back when I thought I was a really depressed butch lesbian, not knowing that I had yet to reach my final form as a less depressed bisexual trans man.”

Patrick listens, interested in the story of Jeff not knowing who he was right away, of how it took him time to get there. He talks about his crush with self-deprecating hindsight of a kind that’s become familiar to Patrick, who’s been thinking about his own past crushes in the same way. It’s good to hear a story about someone going through a messy process of figuring it out, or not fitting the role they thought they did.

Jeff narrates the story of falling in love in the outfield while Scout pulls a block slowly, slowly, out of
the tower. Her little fingers move surprisingly carefully. The tower sways.

“Wow, that was a good one,” Patrick tells her, in an undertone. She grins like a shark and tosses the block casually on the pile beside her; it’s a hilariously adult move, like a pro poker player tossing away a card.

“Your turn,” she says.

Patrick surveys his options. The tower is looking pretty shoddy, at this point.

“So you were worried you’d ruin your friendship if you asked her out?” Patrick presses.

“I didn’t have a lot of friends, and she was the best one. But eventually I got up the courage and told her how I felt.”

“And she said she felt the same, and you fell in love,” Patrick surmises. Jeff snorts.

“She shot me down. Said she loved me, but that she had no interest. It was devastating.”

“Maybe she wasn’t gay?” Patrick tries. Then he winces, not sure he’s getting the vocabulary right. “Or—whatever she thought she’d have to be to date you, back then?”

“She got together with my roommate a month later,” Jeff says, half-groaning, and Patrick can’t help but laugh gently.

“Your turn,” Scout says, poking him in the arm.

“I’m thinking, I’m thinking,” Patrick tells her. Then, to Jeff, he says, “Is this story supposed to encourage me to ask this guy out? Because I’m not feeling very encouraged at the moment.”

“The point is,” Jeff says emphatically, “that we went on being friends. I didn’t ruin anything. It was awkward for a while, but we got over it. And honestly, she and my roommate were really cute together.”

“They came to our wedding,” Emily puts in.

Patrick gives up on surveying the Jenga tower, figuring there really aren’t any safe moves left. He picks one of the few center blocks remaining, and gently pokes it out. So far, so good.

“So, you’re saying, it’s not the risk I think it is.” He bites his lip, reaching around the other side of the tower to grasp the poking-out block. Scout’s eyes are huge as she watches him move slowly.

“I’m saying, if you really have a bond with him, even if it’s not supposed to be a romantic one, it can survive a little awkwardness,” Jeff says.

Patrick eases the block free of the tower; the tower wobbles, once, and then collapses in a heap of wooden blocks, order reduced to chaos. Scout throws her arms in the air and screams with victory like a cartoon villain. Patrick buries his face in his hands.

“Yeah, I say go for it,” Emily says, dryly, and Patrick laughs, helplessly, till his shoulders shake with it.

* 

It’s a few hours later, long after Scout’s gone to sleep, when he leaves Jeff and Emily’s place. He doesn’t want to intrude on Joon-ho and Ray, but he really does have to go to bed eventually. He
texts Joon-ho: *OK if I come back? I miss living in a house*

**Joon-ho:** lol yes it’s fine. I’m getting ready to leave anyhow, was just going to text you. We had a good convo.

It’s followed by a little smiley face, which warms Patrick’s heart.

**Patrick:** I’m glad to hear it
**Patrick:** The town is abuzz with news of your potential reconciliation
**Patrick:** And when I say the town I mean Jeff and Emily, I was just at Jeff and Emily’s place

**Joon-ho:** Love it, love the pressure, amazing

**Patrick:** We just want to imagine good things for you two

Joon-ho sends back a blushing emoji and a wink-kiss emoji, which makes Patrick smile down at his phone.

Patrick wants to write more, like *I’m proud of you* or *I think you’re really brave* or *Congratulations on taking a risk*, but all of those options feel too real, too sincere, too revealing, so he gives up and sends a smiley face instead, hoping it conveys enough of what he means.

*

Up at the top of Roberts Point, about a week later, Patrick sits on a rock, and watches the hawks circle, and breathes.

It’s a Monday, so the store is closed. He has some of his old clients at Ray’s later in the day, but for right now, he has nowhere to be.

The day before, the store closed early, at four pm, their newly-agreed-upon Sunday hours. David had still been protesting it, even though they’d already changed the sign, but Patrick had pointed out that they didn’t have any other employees to cover and might want to sometimes do things in the evenings that required leaving earlier than five-thirty.

“Ah, so you’re concerned about your thrilling social life,” David had said.

“What if I am?”

“Well, if you are, then you should tell me where all the hot night spots are that I’ve somehow missed, so I can go too.”

It had made Patrick think about telling David about LGBTQ2AI-plus nights, about taking David to one with him. The image that came into his mind, unbidden, was holding David’s hand as they walked through Ronnie’s door, or up the hill to Twyla’s sun-dappled backyard. He was struck, in that moment, by a replay of all his previous fantasies: taking a man to a romantic dinner, laying with his head in a man’s lap, talking about the person he’s dating and saying *he*. The difference was, in that moment, that the body in the fantasies was David’s; the person he was talking about was David; the smile above him as he looked up was David’s; the person making fun of the cheesiness of the romantic restaurant with him while secretly also enjoying it was David.

“Well, you know, there’s usually a wonderful salon of elite intellectuals discussing the day’s affairs on the bench in front of Bob’s Garage in the evenings,” Patrick said, distantly, struck by the images in his mind. It wasn’t that he didn’t know he was attracted to David, or that he liked him, or even that
he wanted to date him. It was the sudden and easy way those fantasies all slotted together that made them all intensely real to Patrick in a way they hadn’t been before.

“Well, heaven forbid you miss out on such rousing cerebral debate,” David agreed, shaking his head emphatically. “Four pm it is.”

Now, sitting in the high, clean air and looking out over the landscape below, Patrick lets himself feel it again: brings those ideas back to his mind again and goes through them, one by one, sorting and cataloguing. He lingers over the image of David’s ring-clad hand in his, the same way he used to linger over his favourite baseball cards when he was a kid, memorizing each detail, repeating them to himself, feeling pleasure in the repetition. He constructs the view of David’s face from below, the way David would look if he were holding Patrick’s head in his lap and stroking Patrick’s hair. He thinks about David’s stubble, about the way the shadows would fall around his mouth and down his neck. The easiest of all is the idea of the romantic dinner, since they’ve had working lunches and he’s already seen David look disdainfully at a menu and gesture emphatically with a fork, but Patrick takes care to add new details: David reaching out to touch his hand, their feet touching under the table, the look on David’s face when Patrick would offer him a bite of his dessert, the way David would lean forward and open his mouth to take it.

He’s told himself that it was too much of a risk, to ask David out, to make a move. That he had too much to lose. He’s told himself that he should at least try dating some other guy first, to see what it was like. He feels ready for that, now, for kissing someone, maybe even for having sex with someone, eventually. Logically, he should find someone who might want to . . . practice that, with him, someone who he isn’t emotionally invested in.

But Patrick can’t imagine kissing or dating some other random guy. Even when he thinks of other guys he’s been attracted to—Ben comes to mind, or Joon-ho—he doesn’t feel much of a spark there, anymore. The problem, he thinks, is that he let his attraction to David go on for too long, build too much, to the point that he kind of ruined himself for other men.

So, then, his options are: see if David feels the same, or else keep pining, because he doesn’t think he’s going to get very far with anyone else right now. David might say no, or they might date and it might turn into a disaster, or they might date and it might . . . might work out, who knows. But whatever happens, at this point, the only way out is through. He has to take a risk.

He’ll take his time, he’ll think about it more, maybe he’ll plan some kind of date for them. But he thinks he’s going to do it. Maybe next week. Maybe the week after. Soon.

Standing up, he takes a couple steps closer to the edge of the outcropping, not close enough to be in any danger, but close enough to feel it in his calves, in his stomach, the vertigo spinning inside his body, the old survival instinct making him feel dizzy and uncomfortable. It’s a long way down. Patrick’s breathing picks up, and his heart, too, in anticipation of a fall.

He turns and starts walking back down the path, then shifts into a jog, and before long he’s running, running, joy in the pump of his legs and his arms, in the air he’s dragging in through his lungs, in the solid, satisfying thunk of his shoes against the path, beat, beat, beat, beat, marking out his movement towards home.
Not another bite, not another cigarette,
not a final cup from the coffee-urn before you leave
the warmth steaming at the windows
of the hamburger joint where the Wurlitzer
booms all night without a stop, and the onions are thick
between the buns.

Wrap yourself well in that cheap coat that holds back the wind
like a sieve,
you have a long way to go, the streets are dark, you may have to walk
all night before you find
another heart as lonely, so nearly mad with boredom,
so filled with such strength, such tenderness of love.
Patrick didn’t intend to go from *maybe I’ll ask David to dinner someday, and on that day, I shall make my move to okay doing this now* so quickly, but when David reveals on Friday that it’s his birthday and everyone forgot, Patrick wants to make it better, and can’t help but invite him out. After he does it, he kicks himself, blaming that weird reckless confidence that he seems to get whenever David’s around, that always makes things seem simple and easy. He was going to come up with a plan, and now he has to improvise.

He overspritzes the vegetables in retroactive anxiety.

His reckless, confident alter ego set the time for eight o’clock, which is *really* late for a birthday celebration for a coworker, and makes it harder to play off as a friend thing, but Patrick thinks he could do it. He could let this chance pass by him, the way he didn’t kiss Ben, the way he pulled back from that opening day hug.

After work, he heads back home and opens his now relentlessly organized closet. His guitar is on its stand, gleaming at him, and he thinks wild, careening thoughts about playing for David, about singing for him, about letting him hear what’s been filling up Patrick’s head and heart for weeks now. He shakes that thought away, but the image makes him feel bold again.

He’ll dress up. For his date. With David. As it happens, he already has a present, which he was saving for some anniversary at the store, but which should work fine. Giving someone a present is a sign of being interested. He’ll pay for dinner, which will be another sign, and at the end of dinner, somewhere outside, on the sidewalk, or maybe in his car, he’ll kiss him. And then David will know. And then Patrick won’t have to keep going every day looking at him, with David not knowing. He tells himself that it’s better to get it over with and see what happens, puts on his blazer, and heads out.

Then, on the drive over, he panics, his doubts and fears beginning to stack up again in his mind. He starts thinking of things to say, de-escalating things, things to excuse all the signs he’s trying to put out for David to pick up on: *I assumed the café would have a dinner jacket policy, and I didn’t want to wear one of theirs,* if David mentioned his outfit, and something about the present being nothing, or the cheapest thing he could find. They could make fun of the restaurant together; that had worked this afternoon, to make the date sound like more of a joke.

He could still kiss David, at the end, if he wanted to. That would be unambiguous.

*David gets there fifteen minutes after Patrick, because Patrick got there ten minutes early, after waiting for ten minutes in his car so he wouldn’t be twenty minutes early. Patrick notices his sweater,*
and wonders what it means: it’s the exact same style of black and white sweater as earlier today, but
with a lightning bolt on the front instead of a heart. Did he change for dinner? Or just spill something
on himself at home? Did he not want to wear a sweater with a heart on it to meet Patrick?

He wishes David would get with him on the signs system. He makes the joke he planned to make
about his jacket, so that David’s You look very nice doesn’t rattle around his head for too long on its
own.

It becomes pretty clear that David isn’t picking up the signs when Stevie shows up.

His face does something that he hopes looks more like pleasant surprise than total, embarrassed
devastation, and he says “The more the merrier,” before excusing himself to the restroom.

Once there, he sits on the toilet in the stall, trying to think of things to say. He can’t, really; he can’t
think of any more things to say. He’s tired of saying things. If he had taken the time to plan this out,
if he had made it clear to David that it was a date up front, if he had—if he hadn’t just spontaneously
decided to take David out for his birthday, a day when it’s normal to take friends out and give them
presents—he rubs his hands over his face.

No use thinking about that now. What’s done is done, and now he’s going to have a very
comfortable and amicable dinner with the guy he’s falling for and his ex-girlfriend.

He washes his hands and heads back out there, mind racing and full of white noise, trying to smile
like a friend at a friend’s birthday celebration. Stevie pushes David to open his present, and it’s
embarrassing, mortifying, like it might actually kill him, like he’s strapped to a speeding train and
there’s no way to stop it before the crash.

Groping for the things he’d planned to say to David about the present, he ends up saying all of them
in an awkward stream: “You’re gonna be so underwhelmed when you open it, trust me, I
mean—see? It’s nothing.”

When David opens the present, though, the soft look on his face starts something up in Patrick’s
chest again. He explains the gift to Stevie, and then he feels his breath catch, waiting for David to say
something.

“Um, this is not nothing,” David says, holding eye contact with Patrick, a soft, sincere expression
coming over his face. “So thank you.”

Patrick feels his body settle, calming to stillness, embarrassment dissipating, leaving something
bruised and tender and hopeful behind it. He breathes out, feels like he can breathe again.

Twyla shows up with mozzarella sticks, and Stevie leaves, for whatever inscrutable Stevie reasons,
and then he and David are alone together again, and he’s still wearing a suit and he brought David a
really sentimental gift and maybe the night isn’t entirely ruined after all.

He doesn’t particularly notice eating the mozzarella sticks. His mind starts racing again with things to
say while he chews, and keeps racing after he finishes chewing.

“Thank you again for the present,” David says, into what Patrick realizes was a long silence in which
he thought of things to say but didn’t say any of them. He blinks to awareness and looks at him, and
tries to smile. He’s not doing great at this date business. He’s been on first dates before; they’ve often
felt painful or awkward, but they’ve never felt like this, like he’s dangerously close to having an out
of body experience from pure nervousness and hope. God, he likes being gay, but this is really hard.

“I’ve been saving it,” he admits, though he supposes that’s obvious. “You were on the other side of
the room, selling someone a ceramic bowl, and I was—it was an exciting moment, you know? I wanted to call you over, to do it together, but I didn’t want to interrupt. So I saved the receipt for you, at least.”

David’s eyebrows go up during this story, though Patrick’s not sure why.

“That’s very sweet,” David says, and Patrick nods, unsure what to say. He’s wondering where the hell that confident, reckless asshole went.

“I just wanted to mark the moment,” he says, at last. David nods as if this makes perfect sense.

“I’m glad you did. I hope it’s the start of a long . . . relationship.”

Patrick looks up at him when he says this, startled for a moment, but he can’t figure out what the look in David’s eyes might mean.

He hopes fervently that it means that David has finally realized that this is a date, or that Patrick wanted it to be one. Or that the part of Patrick who didn’t overthink everything wanted it to be one, anyway.

“Me too,” he says, helplessly, his throat suddenly tight. He coughs. “Though it’s worth noting that the majority of small businesses fail within the first eighteen months.”

“Mmm,” David says, polishing off the last mozzarella stick. “Maybe we’ll beat the odds.”

George shows up then, grease-smeared apron and pencil behind his ear, to take their order in Twyla’s absence. Patrick orders a steak, because he wants this to be fancy, to be a real date, and David just says “I’ll have the same” afterwards, which for literally no reason makes Patrick feel tender and weak again.

“I guess that way we’ll both have food poisoning together,” Patrick offers, once George is out of earshot.

“Sounds like a fun bonding experience.”

“It’s a New York strip. How badly can anyone mess up a strip steak? I mean, just, cook it, right?”

“I have never had this particular menu item here before,” David admits, a wry twist to his lips, “but I am willing to put money down that it is in fact a strip of steak that comes from a supplier in New York.”

“That’s heinous,” Patrick replies, smiling as their familiar banter begins to come back. “Surely that’s beyond even the worst crimes of the Café Tropical.”

“You speak too soon,” David cautions him.

The steaks, when they arrive, might’ve been New York strip steaks at some point. David tries to claim to have won their bet, and Patrick has to point out that he never actually took the bet.

“But I made the bet with you,” David protests.

“That’s, again, not how betting works.”

David keeps squabbling about it, arguing in nonsensical circles until Patrick loses his cool and starts laughing, burying his face in his hands. When he comes up for air, he sees that David’s laughing too, but more quietly. David’s also watching him. It makes him feel exposed, but he finds, to his surprise,
that he likes it. He likes David seeing him.

*I'm going to kiss him*, Patrick tells himself. *Tonight*. His heart starts to stutter and his mouth goes dry, when he thinks about it, but he tells it to himself anyway, again and again: *I'm going to kiss him*. He can do it: he can kiss someone he actually wants to kiss, for once in his life.

They fall into their old conversational patterns from the store, with David telling stories about his family, or about things that have happened around the motel. Patrick notices again that, beyond a few self-deprecating references, he doesn’t really talk about the times before the Roses landed in Schitt’s Creek. It’s a relief, because it means that Patrick doesn’t have to talk about his past, either; he can just be New Patrick, here, with David. He returns with stories of his own, doing the same, sticking to things he’s done since being here: baseball games with Ronnie, Ray’s increasingly intense closet organization techniques, the horrifying business ideas he’s been brought by some of the locals.

“Oh, so my business idea wasn’t actually the worst one, then,” David says, sipping his wine.

“David,” Patrick says, and he can’t help the fondness in his voice. “Yours was the best one. It was the only one that made me decide to give up my day job.”

David beams, but looks shy, too, caught out by Patrick’s honesty. Patrick thinks: *I’m gonna kiss him tonight, later; probably in less than an hour.* In less than an hour, he will have kissed David.

By the time the bill comes, Patrick feels really good, comfortable, despite the low thrum of tension under his skin. He likes David, genuinely enjoys talking to him, and the energy between them feels good, feels right in a way Patrick’s never known before. Every time he glances at David, or David glances at him, he feels that energy build, just a little, the way it had on the night of the store opening.

This time, though, he’s not going to chicken out.

He finishes his beer. He’s gonna kiss him, tonight. Really soon, now. He’s thought about where and how to do it: outside on the sidewalk, pressed up against the brick wall of the café. Or he could ask David to walk to his car, and kiss him there, his hands low on David’s back, between David and the car door. Or he could drive David home, and kiss him when they get there, outside the motel.

Patrick’s deciding on which one to choose as he picks up the bill and slips his debit card into the holder.

“Oh, hey, no,” David says, half-heartedly, in the usual dance of someone on their birthday pretending like they’re going to pay part of the bill. Patrick gives him a look.

“It’s my treat,” he says. George was hovering nearby, and now swoops in to take the debit card away. They’re the last people here, and Patrick has been picking up some very subtle signals that he’s ready to close up.

“Because it’s my birthday,” David says. It’s almost, almost a tease, Patrick thinks, or it would be if it didn’t also sound like a question. He doesn’t know how to answer the question he thinks David’s asking, so he deflects it instead.

“Yes,” he says. “Because it is very rude to let someone pay for their own dinner on their birthday. Even if that person had a steak and the most expensive glass of wine on the menu.”

“You had the steak first,” David protests. “I was following your lead. And since the most expensive wine on the menu is six dollars a glass instead of five, I think your chequing account will recover.”

“I don’t know, I might need a raise at the store.”
“Then you’ll have to ask our financial manager for one,” David replies, and Patrick grins and ducks his head, already seeing that he’s lost this round. “But he’s notoriously frugal; I wouldn’t count on it being in the budget.”

“Touché,” Patrick laughs. “I can’t win if I have to argue with myself.”

“Now you know how I feel. It’s exhausting.” David’s smiling like it’s not exhausting, though, not at all. Patrick feels that energy tick up between them, spark after spark after spark.

George comes back with the handheld debit machine, and Patrick punches in his code, then takes the receipt when it prints out. He decides, quietly and to himself, not to write this off as a business dinner, no matter what else happens tonight.

They walk outside together. “Want a ride back to the motel?” Patrick asks.

“Yes, sure,” David says, kind of quickly.

They walk up the street together, through the cool summer evening. The brick wall of the café recedes behind them, and Patrick didn’t kiss David there. His stomach is in knots and he’s hoping desperately that he does it, that he kisses David. He wants to, so badly. He wants to press his body against David’s in the dark and put their mouths together.

“So you’re parked . . . where?”

“Up the street a ways,” Patrick says, awkwardly. He parked far away so that David wouldn’t see him waiting in the car before he went in. He realizes now that it’s hard to explain.

“Because there was so much traffic and all the closer spots were full, oorr . . . ?”

“Hey, sometimes I like a little walk,” Patrick says. He imagines what it’d be like to walk with his hand in David’s hand. He’s going to kiss him; he hopes he’s going to kiss him.

Part of him is whispering, though, that someone like David, if he really had feelings for a guy, he’d go for it. He wouldn’t wait around. David has been with men before, lots of men from some of the things he says, men like Sebastien Raine, and he was a model and a gallery owner and once breastfed from a woman in public as part of a performance art piece. If he were interested in Patrick, he probably would’ve kissed him by now.

Shoving that thought aside, Patrick promises himself that he’ll kiss David when they get to his car.

“Yes, what could be more charming than an evening stroll past the teenagers getting high on their parents’ benzos.”

“You have a very high opinion on the quality of drugs that teenagers around here are taking.”

“Do I? Are you in with the youth crowd, then?”

“No, but I sweep up in front of the store in the mornings, and it’s mostly broken beer bottles and meth stuff.”

“Meth stuff?” David parrots.

“You know what I mean.”

“ Barely.”
They arrive at Patrick’s car, a good two blocks from the café. Patrick has an absurd urge to walk around and open the door for David, the way he might have, in his old life, for a girl. But he has no idea whether that’s okay, or . . . heteronormative, or sweet, or inappropriate when he still hasn’t actually mentioned that this is a date or done any kissing, so he just beeps the car doors open instead.

David comes up slightly behind him, so there’s a moment in which Patrick could stop him, could gently touch his shoulder or his chest, could lean in, lean up, and kiss him. He can almost feel David’s jaw against his palm and almost taste David’s mouth against his, but then David’s moved away again, towards the other side of the car, and the moment’s dissipated.

Patrick starts to feel a low sense of dread, picturing the next day, working side by side with David, still not having done this. Then the day after that, and the day after that. The thought is unbearable.

He drives David home, which takes about five minutes. The walk to Patrick’s car from the café took almost as long, just in the opposite direction.

By the time they pull into the motel parking lot, the roiling dread inside of him is worse; he’s looking at David’s face and his thoughts are twisting and turning around themselves and he’s sure, absolutely sure, that he’s not going to be able to bridge the last foot of space between them.

“Well that was a fun night,” David says. Patrick thinks he should say something sweet, something sentimental that might convey interest.

“I’m really glad I decided to invest in your business, David,” is what ends up coming out of his mouth, after a long pause. The look on David’s face is warm, amused.

“That is a really lovely thing to say.”

Patrick’s heart catches in his throat and he thinks again about that foot of space between them, that wide expanse that he doesn’t think he’s going to bring himself to cross. He could kiss David now, he could do it right now. He falls back on teasing him instead.

“And I’m so glad you did, Patrick, because you’ve really helped to turn it into the success that it is.”

David doesn’t look fooled. “Mmm. A bold claim.” He nods, and his lips quirk knowingly, and Patrick can’t help it, he looks down at David’s full lips, just for a second, and in that second David is moving, his hand cupping Patrick’s neck, his mouth meeting Patrick’s mouth, and it’s happening, finally happening, and all of Patrick’s anxiety starts to drain out of his body. He relaxes into the kiss after a second, feeling it, really feeling it, the relief burning away and leaving something else behind it, a perfect, acheing heat. He’s never felt anything like it before, this heat in his stomach, in his muscles, in his cells, roaring through him, stealing the oxygen from his lungs.

The kiss David gives him is gentle, for all that it’s searing, and it doesn’t, objectively speaking, last long; David pulls away after a few seconds, and then they sort of look at each other and don’t look at each other. Patrick feels a small smile blooming on his face, matching the sudden lightness in his chest. It happened. He hears David clearing his throat, realizes that he’s probably waiting for some kind of response. Patrick searches for words to say, for something he could say to express how he’s feeling right now.

“Thank you,” he says, eventually, raw and honest.

David shakes his head. “For what?”

And that’s the question, isn’t it, because Patrick had no intention of telling David any of this, not at first: he had no intention of telling him how inexperienced he is, of burdening him with that. It’s
embarrassing, and weird, and would just make David want him less, he was sure. How could someone with so much experience want someone like Patrick, someone who can’t bring himself to kiss a man he likes?

He didn’t want to let any of that slip out. In his fantasy, he’d kissed David suavely, up against the wall of the café or the side of the car, and he hadn’t thanked him after.

But all he’s feeling is gratitude and relief, gratitude and relief and joy swelling up inside him, the feeling too big to contain in his skin, and the thing is, he likes David: he likes him so much, and he wants him to know about this feeling too, wants him to know how deeply affected Patrick is by this one kiss.

So he tells him exactly the thing he had no intention of saying.

“Um. I’ve never done that before. With a guy.” He steals occasional glances at David, mostly looking at the steering wheel, or down at his lap. David only looks mildly surprised.

“Oh, okay.”

“Yeah. And, uh,” he exhales hard, and forces himself to say the rest of it: “I was getting a little scared that I was gonna let you leave here without us having done that, so, um. Thank you for, um, making that happen for us.”

David doesn’t look upset or annoyed; in fact, he looks delighted. “Well, um. Fortunately, I am a very generous person. So.”

Patrick smiles and blows out air through his nose. It’s an additional relief on top of the relief of the kiss itself, that he’s told this to David, that David knows. David knows, and he’s still looking at Patrick like that, still teasing him gently.

“Can we talk tomorrow?” Patrick asks, because he thinks if he did any more talking or . . . or anything tonight, his chest would fill up with emotion and float him away entirely.

David smiles and does a bunch of nods and headshakes that all mean yes, yes, yes, of course, that all mean I’m happy with you. Patrick feels that smile again, all over his face.

“Mm-hm. We can talk whenever you’d like,” David says, and Patrick breathes, breathes: David kissed him, and now David’s giving him the space that he needs to think about the kiss. Patrick wonders if David knows that, knows that Patrick needs to think things through sometimes, to process.

“Just preferably not before 10am? Because I’m not really a morning person,” David adds. Patrick grins.

“Mm-hm.” Then he says, “Goodnight, David,” as David gets out of the car.

David leans down and looks at him through the car window, beautiful and real in the dark, beautiful and real and having kissed him. “Goodnight, Patrick.”

Patrick pulls the car out once David reaches the motel room door, and starts to drive away. He’s leaving the parking lot when he sees David running up beside the car, waving his arms. Patrick stops immediately. His first, wild thought is did he change his mind? He ducks his head and looks out the passenger side window, still rolled down.

“Shit, sorry, I forgot my goddamn present,” David says, a little out of breath from chasing the car up
the hill. Patrick laughs, all his relief and joy spilling out of him.

“I would’ve brought it to you tomorrow,” he points out, when he has himself together again.

“Well, I didn’t want you to think I didn’t appreciate it!” David’s face is all consternation as he reaches in through the open window and grabs the gift bag from the footwell.

Patrick thinks that he might’ve thought that, if he’d found the gift bag later; he might’ve worried that David didn’t appreciate it. David didn’t want him to worry. David wanted him to know that he cares.

“I’m glad it means so much to you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you run before.”

“Yeah, well. Don’t count on ever seeing it again.”

“I feel blessed to have had this experience, then,” Patrick says, and he means it, even though he doesn’t say it like he means it. He means it wholeheartedly.

“Good,” David says, softly, like maybe he knows. Patrick’s starting to think that David always knows when Patrick’s saying what he means without saying what he means.

“Don’t chase cars in the dark, David.”

“I’ll do my best.” He smiles. “Goodnight again.”

“Goodnight,” Patrick says, and this time he waits until he sees David go into the motel before he pulls away.

*

He drives home slowly and carefully, stopping for the full two seconds at every four-way and signaling every turn, even though there are no other cars on the road. He’s glad, when he gets home, to see that Ray’s car isn’t on the street and the lights in the house are off, because he doesn’t know how he’d talk to Ray right now, what he’d say. His brain isn’t working.

Or, it’s working, but the inside of his head feels still and empty, like a whole bunch of programs he’d been running in the background had suddenly stopped eating up memory. He feels like he has vast, untapped reserves of energy available, that he could run a marathon, or reorganize every single closet in Ray’s house, or write a song.

He shies away from that last thought, unsure that he wants to hear the probably tooth-rotting music he might be capable of writing right now. It’s like he’s another person, someone he knows but can barely recognize, a new presence under his same old skin.

Buzzing with that energy, with that New Patrick feeling, he turns on every light on the first floor of the house, then plugs his phone into Ray’s excellent speaker system and scrolls through his music. He imagines David here with him, pulling faces at Patrick’s alt-country collection, vetoing all the not-so-alt-country automatically, making fun of all the soulful singer-songwriter R&B, until, until . . .

He smiles and puts on some Whitney Houston. He senses that he and David could get together on the divas, though that might be a bit of a cliché.

Thinking about that, he wonders what else he and David might be able to listen to together. He’s at the point of considering track order when he realizes what he’s doing: God help him, but after one kiss, he’s ready to make David a playlist. Who the fuck is he; he’s like a lovestruck teenager; he’s never felt this way before, even when he was a teenager; he’s never felt this way before; he never
wants to stop feeling this way. Like every cell in his body is swelling with purpose, with power.

Kissing David did this to him. Though the Whitney isn’t hurting either.

He sings along, loudly, not caring when his voice breaks on the high notes. He putters around the house aimlessly, looking in the fridge even though his stomach is still full of steak, doing the dishes, tidying his desk, sitting and scrolling through his emails before getting restless again, standing back up and going back to looking in the fridge.

When “I Wanna Dance with Somebody” comes on, he gives up all pretense: first tapping his foot, then spinning around on his sock feet on the kitchen tile, then finally throwing himself into it, dancing around the living room, jumping up and down, arms pumping, until he’s sweaty and tired and giggling helplessly at himself, at how ridiculous he is. He’s never been a good dancer and he doesn’t feel like a good dancer now, but he feels good. It feels good to move, in his new body, his body that’s kissed David and been kissed by David. At the end of the song he collapses down to the floor, still laughing, still breathing hard.

One thing he knows for sure: he will never, ever tell David that he reacted to his first gay kiss by dancing around to Whitney Houston. David would make that pursed-lips-endlessly-amused face, the one he made after Patrick told him about the frame for the business license, and he’d never hear the end of it.

Thinking about that makes Patrick want to tell him.

The music moves on to “I’m Every Woman,” and Patrick laughs again, helplessly, because he doesn’t think he’s quite gay enough for that one yet, boy-kissing aside.

Catching his breath, he thinks again about the kiss. It’d been so brief, but long enough to feel the warmth of David’s lips and the soft press of his tongue. He’s glad his first kiss—first kiss with a man, he has to correct himself—that his first kiss was with David.

David, whose big, gentle hand cupped his jaw firmly; David, whose mouth pressed to his with daring and confidence just shading into heat; David, who gave him space to talk after the kiss, to confess, and took Patrick’s honesty and inexperience in stride.

Whenever Patrick’s imagined having gay sex before—and he’s definitely imagined it—it’s been overwritten by the anxiety he always felt during sex in his previous life, in his previous body: all the is this right, am I doing it okay, is that enough, when is it going to be over, the careening stressful sensation of being always, just subtly, wrong. When David kissed him, it felt, finally, like people said kisses were supposed to feel, soft and beautiful and right, something he could get lost in. Something easy. Kissing David made all of the tension he’d been carrying around just melt away.

When he’s imagined having gay sex before, he’s also thought about his own lack of know-how, the embarrassment of not knowing what to do, the inevitable attempt to just get through the experience while trying not to seem nervous, and hope that bravado and luck would be enough. It’s what he did with all the women he dated, after all. He’s thought about hating it, about not being good enough at it, about having to prove himself somehow.

He’s realizing, suddenly, that being with David might not—if they get there, if they . . . have sex together—it might not end up being like that. He dares to extrapolate from their kiss: being in bed with David, feeling warm and relaxed, seen, honestly seen. Telling David that he doesn’t know what he’s doing, and David smiling and treating him gently, the way he kissed him gently tonight, the way he gently agreed to talk whenever Patrick liked. It’s possible that not knowing what to do could be okay, in that hypothetical future, that he could even be okay with David knowing that he doesn’t
know what to do.

Sitting on the couch, imagining it, he finds his hand stroking up and down his thigh, over his suit pants, and the sensation of it is new in some intangible way even though it’s his same old hand and his same old thigh. Experimentally, he brushes his knuckles across his dick, over the sturdy fabric, and that one little teasing point of contact feels like nothing he’s ever had before. He arches up involuntarily, hips stuttering at just that glancing touch.

Patrick blinks into the dim room, mouth falling open with the force of his breath, astonished.

Then he turns off the music, goes to his room, and shuts the door. He kicks off his pants and underwear, shucks off his blazer, pulls his button-up roughly off his shoulders after hastily undoing all the buttons, tossing it in a heap on the floor.

There’s lotion on the nightstand, that he’s hardly ever used except for dry skin.

All his adult life, he’s thought of himself as a not-very-sexual person, someone who enjoys an orgasm now and then but doesn’t really need it. He masturbates occasionally, more for stress relief or as a sleep aid than anything, and he never really got the whole discourse around it, the way other guys talked about it. After he got through the horrifying, embarrassing puberty stage, he’d never needed a cold shower, or had trouble waiting for a girl to come first. It’d just been . . . fine. Normal, which meant, not that often, not that much, not that good.

As he strips himself down and gets on the bed, he touches his skin; not just his cock but all over, his thighs, his sides, up over his pecs, the soft skin of his throat. It feels incredible, all of it, hot, tender, like every touch is bruising and burning him at once and he can’t get enough of it.

It feels like his body waking up, for the first time in years and years.

When he takes himself in hand, he groans without meaning to, a guttural noise from deep in his chest. It’s an utter surprise but he can’t even stop to think about it because, because, God, the feeling of his slick hand on his cock is familiar but also completely, utterly new, the sensation intense, almost overwhelming.

He grits his teeth and closes his eyes, returning to his fantasy as his hand starts to move up and down: David in bed with him. David knowing about his inexperience, and seeing it, and accepting it. He imagines David kissing his mouth and saying something sweet, something like I got you, Patrick or You’re doing great, something like This is all you need to be, just do this, this is fine. David touching his skin lightly with his fingertips, David jacking him slow and easy just—

He comes faster than he thought was possible, embarrassingly fast and hard, his whole body pulling taut and still for long moments while he spills and spills into his hand. After, there are black spots in front of his eyes and he can’t catch his breath and he feels ridiculous, the best orgasm he can remember and it took nothing at all to do it, just a single kiss from a handsome man who listened while Patrick told the truth.

He’s done pretending, really done; he doesn’t have to do it anymore. He’s going to be honest with David, honest from here on out. He had no idea how much that weight was still dragging him down.

He cleans up and thinks about reading for a while, or watching TV. He’s awake, wide awake, not sleepy at all like he usually gets after an orgasm. The whole world around him feels like it’s painted in new colours and there’s no way to turn down the glorious brightness of them.

There’s a book on the nightstand that he doesn’t pick up. His phone is in his pants pocket, on the
floor, and he doesn’t grab that either. Instead, he lies in bed, spread-eagled, mostly naked, one sock still on, eyes open, watching the pulse of the universe around him.

*

He sleeps, at some point, or he must because he loses time. When he wakes up, he’s under the covers and it’s the glowing dark before the dawn, birds singing outside in anticipation of the sun. The clock next to the bed says 4:35.

His cock is hard again, full and insistent between his legs. Without thinking, he reaches down to touch himself and it feels like it felt the night before, like a glorious burst of sensation. He strokes himself slowly, deliberately, taking his time to revel in the feeling. His mind feels quiet; he focuses on the sensation of his hand, the roll of his hips, the bite of his short fingernails into his thigh.

“I’m gay,” he says, just a murmur behind his lips, barely audible. He imagines saying it to David, the smile and raised eyebrow David might give him, and his cock jumps in his hand.

It could be David’s hand, he thinks. It could be David touching him, making him feel good, watching him and taking care of him.

“I wanna fuck you,” he tries, in a whisper to himself, to another man, to David, and, “I want you to fuck me.” He has only basic anatomical knowledge of those processes but he wants it, he wants it, and he wants the feeling of wanting it most of all, like that desire itself, by its presence, soothes a deeper desire within him.

He lets his hand speed up on his cock, sweating now. He has no idea if Ray came home last night or not, and the walls are thin, so he tries not to move the bed or rustle the sheets or make too much noise. It’s never been a problem before. He’s always gotten himself off perfunctorily in the shower, and he’s never, ever, felt the urge to groan or whine when it was just his hand on his dick, his other hand on his thigh, rubbing up and down restlessly. He feels that way now, though, like it’s all he can do not to thrust his hips, to shout, to grab the headboard behind him.

He wants to make noise: he wants to be loud.

Keeping his breathing as steady as he can, relentlessly controlled, keeping his mouth closed on the sounds he wants to make, keeping his movements gradual and deliberate on his cock, he crests agonizingly slowly, the orgasm like an oncoming tide that lifts him and lifts him and lifts him until his mind whites out and his body shudders and pleasure rolls through him in breaking, crashing waves.

“Holy shit,” he says afterwards, involuntarily, then claps his own hand over his mouth.

He doesn’t hear Ray’s voice or footsteps, so after a few tense seconds he relaxes and grabs some tissues to clean up. He came . . . basically all over himself, wow.

As he tiptoes to the bathroom, he thinks: If this is how I feel when I’m alone, what the hell is it going to be like when David touches me?

The idea is so hot that he gets off again in the shower, gasping and curling forward over his frantic, jacking hand as the hot water spills over his shoulders.

But when the rush of it is over, and Patrick attends to the mundane practicalities of soaping up, rinsing, and drying himself off, he finds that the idea is difficult, too, frightening. He wants David to see him like that. He doesn’t know if he could bear for David to see him like that. Exposed. Vulnerable. He doesn’t know what he’d do, how he’d react, in that situation, and what if he doesn’t like it? He feels like his body is out of his control, switched on in a way it’s never been before. He
can’t predict what will happen, can’t plan for it at all, and it’s glorious, in a way, like the world is opening before him, but the sheer quantity of unknown factors leaves him shaken, unsure.

By the time he’s out of the shower it’s after five am, and Patrick can’t see himself sleeping anymore. He thinks about hanging around here for the morning, catching up on paperwork for clients, and it’s deeply distasteful.

As dawn breaks, Patrick drives to the store. He’ll get some work done, in that space, before David gets there, and try to get used to this feeling lighting him up from under his skin.

* * *

He’s replayed their kiss and their conversation in his mind so many times that by the time David walks in, hours later, looking gorgeous in light colours, Patrick is brimming over with excitement: to see him, to talk to him, to tell him how good he feels. His palms start to sweat.

“Hi,” David says, and makes his way over to Patrick with purpose.

Patrick grins, feeling pulled in David’s direction, as if by gravity, like the sensation of walking down a mountain. David kisses his cheek and it’s perfect, perfect, charming and affectionate and gentle, so that Patrick feels himself blush with pleasure while he kisses David’s cheek in return. After that, it’s a small step to opening his mouth and talking, honestly, like he had the night before. He can’t help himself: he’s full of joy, and energy, and purpose, and he wants David to know.

“I’ve been up since five,” he confesses, “Could not sleep, I’ve been thinking about . . . stuff. You know. Last night.”

He knows he’s babbling, and he has a distant sense that he should be embarrassed to admit all this, but when he explains the lightness in his body, the sensation of a weight suddenly lifted, David’s face is so understanding that he can’t even bring himself to care.

Then David asks if he can stay over at Patrick’s place, and Patrick can almost hear the screeching sound inside his head, see the red klaxons screaming ALERT!.

“Huh,” he says, thinking about David in his bed, David touching him, having sex with David. He finds he’s deeply apprehensive about actually doing the things he whispered to himself in the dawn.

Patrick doesn’t like feeling this way, unsteady, unsure, pulled in multiple directions at once. He doesn’t like not knowing how his body is going to react to actual sex. He doesn’t know if he’s ready to trust David with . . . all of that.

“I’m gonna need to take this a lot slower than a sleepover tonight,” he says, and that’s good, he thinks; that’s right. He’s being honest, he’s going to be honest. He just hopes like hell that David isn’t—that David doesn’t mind waiting.

David immediately backtracks confusingly, leaving Patrick even more unsure and unsteady. He furrows his brow and is trying to figure out what David’s saying when Mrs Rose walks in and interrupts.

After a false start or two, a discussion about a dead body, and some legal advice for David’s mom, they get it figured out. And Mrs Rose actually calls him by his name, for the first time, so that’s got to be some kind of win.

Patrick’s still so full of joy and excitement that he hasn’t thought of anything to say, any jokes to cover up his feelings or minimize them, and he doesn’t even care, he’s so happy, he feels so good.
So later that morning he goes up to David and tells him the rest, tells him what their kiss meant to him.

“You know, when you kissed me, that felt like my first time. All the things that you’re supposed to feel, I—I felt them, last night.”

He’s watching David carefully to see his reaction to this confession, and it softens his heart when David smiles, obviously delighted, obviously happy to accept more truth from Patrick. It makes Patrick’s head spin, all this truthtelling, makes him feel giddy with relief.

“Well, if we’re being honest with each other, this is sort of like my first time, too,” David says.

Patrick has about six dry and witty things to say to that, but David interrupts himself: “I mean, it’s not, I’ve kissed, like, a thousand people. But no one I cared about, or respected, or thought was nice. So in a way I guess we’re both starting something new.”

This is a sensation Patrick remembers: he felt this way when he stepped through the door to his first LGBTQ2AI-plus night, when he told his lacrosse story, when Ray hugged him. This is the feeling of not being alone. David’s here with him, vulnerable with him, and it makes him feel safer.

“Thank you, David,” he says, deeply and sincerely, for the second time in a twelve-hour period. Then, wanting to see what will happen, he tells David that he’s a good person, planting a joke to see if David will find it. David hears it immediately, because he’s quick like Patrick is, stubborn, suspicious.

“Hm. It’s just that I said nice person,” he says, playing the game.

“I know,” Patrick says, loving how beautiful David is when he’s annoyed, unable to resist his smart, fast mouth. Patrick finally kisses him, initiates a kiss with David for the first time, like he wanted to last night. Making that choice is thrilling all by itself.

Anyone could walk in the store and see them; anyone could walk in and think, oh, that guy’s gay. Patrick likes it. He wants to kiss David in front of the window, and on the street, and in the café; he wants everyone to see.

David kisses him back, there in the middle of the store; David told his sister about their kiss last night; David’s hands rest warm and fluttering on his biceps and don’t leave, even to needle Patrick some more about calling him nice; and even when a customer comes in a minute later, he doesn’t let go right away.

After that, Patrick feels like he knows where he is again: he teases David, and David teases back, and on top of all their usual banter there’s that same energy from the night before but banked, cooled. More permanent, somehow.

Patrick feels it flare up again every time David touches him, and throughout the day, David touches him a lot. On his way to the stockroom, he runs his fingertips along Patrick’s shoulder, casually, and it makes Patrick’s skin feel hot in a little line where David’s fingers were; he rests a hand on his waist, gently, guiding him out from behind the register, and it makes Patrick’s whole body feel alive and awake in response; he squeezes Patrick’s arm, a gesture Patrick would classify as completely platonic, and yet he feels it all up and down his entire nervous system.

He’s never reacted to touch this way before, and he doesn’t know if it’s men or if it’s David or if it’s both. It’s surprising, unsettling, and he never wants it to stop, and he doesn’t know how much more he can take.
Thankfully, there’s a nice little rush in the afternoon that keeps them both busy and pays the rent, and it doesn’t end till a good ten minutes after closing time. Patrick has time to take a breath and calm himself down while David helps customers on the other side of the store. When it’s finally over, David flips the sign and turns the bolt in the door, then comes up to the counter where Patrick is standing and leans over it. He picks up Patrick’s hand in his own, looking down at it, stroking over Patrick’s knuckles with his fingers. Patrick suppresses a shiver.

“You’re awfully touchy,” Patrick points out, and David’s little fingertip-touches to Patrick’s hand stop immediately.

“Sorry,” he says, which surprises Patrick into silence for a second. It’s like when he asked Patrick, earlier that morning, if he had regrets about their kiss: Patrick almost can’t process it, it’s so far from what he was thinking and feeling.

“No, no,” he says, eventually. “I like it. It’s just surprising.”

David’s mouth pulls into a frown. “I feel like I keep trampling all over you, here. I should let you— you should be the one to touch.” He puts Patrick’s hand back down on the counter and pulls back.

“No, that’s not what I—David. Come back over here.”

David purses his lips and steps back up to the counter. Patrick takes his hand, the mirror of their position before.

“Okay, I actually have no idea what taking it slow means,” David blurts out, staring down at the place where Patrick’s thumb is brushing over the back of his hand. “So, like, I thought, touching is probably okay, but I am really going to— you’re really going to have to make some decisions, here, because I can guarantee I am going to fuck it up if left to figure it out on my own.”

Patrick frowns, because he knows that feeling from the inside out. “You’re not going to fuck it up,” he says, not meeting David’s eyes. He clears his throat and gets more honest words out. “Touching is . . . fine. Good. I like your hands. I like having them on me.” He trails his thumb over David’s rings, the metal smooth and cool in contrast to David’s skin.

“Okay, so, you can’t just go saying things like that, in broad daylight—”

“I just didn’t know you would be . . . you know. Touchy-feely. It’s a new thing to learn about you.”

David leans further over the counter, draws his fingertip up Patrick’s jaw, and kisses him, mouth a little open, tongue just brushing Patrick’s lips. Their third kiss. He pulls away too soon, and Patrick takes a second to open his eyes.

“I am not,” David says, then leans back in and steals another, briefer kiss, their fourth, “touchy-feely. Ew.”

Patrick laughs. Their faces are still close; he can feel David’s breath on his skin. “What do you call it, then?”

“Showing . . . um, affection,” David says, haltingly, as if realizing halfway through that affection is an emotion and that he shouldn’t readily confess to it.

“I like that,” Patrick says, affectionately. “Affection, okay.”

David looks down to where his hand is still in Patrick’s. “So. About those, uh, boundaries,
“I don’t want to have sex yet,” Patrick says, really fast, too fast. David kind of winces, then nods. Patrick realizes, with a drop in his stomach, that he has no idea what’s going on inside David’s head.

“Yes, right, I get that, I got that, actually, that was clear,” he says. “I just meant, so, I can kiss you, or, or touch your shoulder, or—”

“You’ve done those things already, David,” Patrick points out. “Are you asking permission for things you’ve already done?”

“I’m asking you to be clear about your expectations, is all, so that I can be a good—be a, um, gentleman while you wait to see if you . . . want . . . sex. With me.”

Patrick laughs softly, because it’s becoming increasingly clear that they are nowhere near the same page right now. “Trust me, the wanting isn’t the issue.”

David’s head snaps up, holding Patrick’s gaze. “What?”

“I’m just—it’s new, David, I’m all brand new over here, and I, it’s a lot to deal with, and there are a lot of things that I . . . I want. I do want . . . that, though. Want you. Eventually. I’ve been wanting you, for a long time.” He ducks his head, then forces himself to look up again, at David’s face, which is doing something complicated.

David swallows, and Patrick squeezes his hand. After a second, David says, “I’ve been wanting you, too.” It’s quiet and sounds raw, like it was hard to say. Patrick has to take a deep breath.

“So let me take some smaller steps first,” Patrick grins, nervously. “Get a little practice in.” He kisses David again, making their fifth kiss like their third one, tasting his mouth, tongues just touching. “Before the big game.”

“Well, sports metaphors are a sure way to throw a big bucket of ice water on any and all proceedings,” David says, voice husky, belying his words by kissing Patrick back, over and over again, in small, soft bursts. Kisses number six, and seven, and eight, and then Patrick loses count, and they’re just kissing, they’re just people who kiss each other.

“That’s gonna be tough, because sports metaphors are my only turn-on,” Patrick says, mournfully, when they pull apart.

“Mmm, I should’ve suspected.”

“That’s why I’m gonna ask us to keep things to first base for a while,” he adds. “Maybe steal second on occasion.”

“Is that a joke or your actual boundary?”

“But eventually, I guess we could talk about going for the five-hole,” Patrick says, feeling his face heat but not caring when he sees David’s eyebrows go up in surprise. “If we can get good wood on it, and no one’s holding the stick.”

David actually lets go of him and steps back. “What the fuck,” he says, but Patrick can see he’s suppressing his laughter. It feels good, so good, just to do this, just to make dumb dirty jokes about the things they could do, the things Patrick can’t imagine actually doing yet. Patrick grins at him, delighted.
“The only problem we’ll have is if someone’s riding the D,” he says, to David’s emphatic disbelieving headshake.

“No, no, that’s not a real one, you are making that one up. And also, trust me, it’s not anything like a problem.” Then David looks mildly alarmed, like he’s horrified at himself for saying too much about sex or else for participating in the sexy sports puns conversation, Patrick can’t tell. He likes it either way, likes David playing along with him. Patrick’s whole face is hot now, cheeks and ears and down his neck, but he doesn’t care, he likes it, likes that he gets to do this.

“And you know I’ll be cheering when you grind it into the crease,” he adds, and it’s so dirty and so daring but also so ridiculous that he can’t quite get it out, breaking and laughing on the last word.

“Ew,” David says, profoundly shocked and horrified. Patrick laughs at him, and is embarrassed, and laughs, and is embarrassed, all in a round, until David comes around the counter and grabs him up and hugs him tight and kisses his temple. “Stop talking,” David says, actually laughing out loud now. “Stop.”

Patrick stops, and holds David for a while, his arms around David’s waist, David’s arms around his shoulders, his face pressed in tight against David’s neck. It’s their first hug since the one they had on opening day. He closes his eyes and tries to memorize the position, the feeling of it, the two of them slotted together like this. He has no idea what else to do with David, besides hold him and make jokes about sex acts he’s definitely not ready for, but he hopes he’ll figure it out.

* Once they finish closing up properly, he finds himself stuck in that same pull of gravity again, and kisses David a bunch more times, standing together in the middle of the store. He kisses David until he starts to feel wild and out of control, kissing desperately, making noises; David kisses him back, just as hard, just as desperate. Patrick doesn’t know what David has to feel desperate about, but at least he’s not alone.

Eventually Patrick pulls back, panting, and rests his head against David’s chest. David has a broad, strong chest; Patrick likes it; Patrick likes how it feels under his forehead. He tries to breathe. David’s hands come up and stroke his shoulders lightly. When Patrick says he’s going to go home by himself for the evening, he feels David nod, then kiss the top of his head.

“Can I take you out tomorrow?” David asks. “On. Like. A date?”

Patrick’s surprised; he hadn’t thought of David taking him anywhere. He assumed he’d do the taking, because that’s what he was used to. Gender is weird. He’s never really noticed how weird it is, before all this, how many rules he unconsciously followed.

“I would like that,” Patrick says, lifting his eyes to finally look at David, and David smiles, smiles like Patrick just gave him a gift. Patrick can’t take that, doesn’t know what to do with it, so he kisses the smile and kisses David’s jaw and says goodnight to him before he does something awful, like have sex with him on top of the alpaca wool sweaters.

“K. See you tomorrow,” David says, softly. He’s still smiling, like Patrick doesn’t need to do anything else to make him happy. Patrick locks the door and watches him walk away for a minute or two.

Patrick’s still thinking about it ten minutes later, when he’s walking in the door to Ray’s house, the way David looked walking against the backdrop of the town and the bright evening sunshine,
beautiful and immaculate, light haloed around him. The way he looked like he didn’t belong there, but walked as though he did.

Ray and Joon-ho are curled up on the couch in the living room. They seem to be comfortable together again, and the smile on Joon-ho’s face looks far more relaxed than anything Patrick saw from him when they met up at the café.

Ray calls out to him immediately. “Patrick! Come watch this film with us.”

Joon-ho lifts a disbelieving eyebrow, and Patrick shakes his head, because only Ray would consistently, every time, invite other people along on his dates.

“Is it a Meg Ryan vehicle?” Patrick asks. Ray wags his finger at him.

“No! It’s Saving Face, a classic of the lesbian film genre that Joon-ho had never seen.”

Patrick decides he’s here for a classic of the lesbian film genre. It occurs to him that he’s never really watched many gay movies. He remembers the jokes on his hockey team when Brokeback Mountain came out, guys pretending to kiss or fuck each other, stuff about barebacking that he didn’t even understand at the time. He remembers feeling uncomfortable about those jokes, and not knowing what to do or say when he heard them. He remembers, eventually, making some of the jokes himself. He winces at the memory.

He perches in the chair next to the couch. “You’re sure it’s cool for me to join you?”

Ray starts to enthuse a yes, but Patrick watches Joon-ho, and Ray stops himself mid-sentence.

“Joon-ho, do you mind?” Ray asks, clearly still working on not steamrolling over him.

“I don’t mind,” Joon-ho says, a small smile on his face. “Hi, Patrick.”

“Hi,” Patrick smiles back.

It’s early in the film, and Ray fills him in on the backstory, so it’s easy to figure out what’s going on. They settle in to watch, with Ray and Joon-ho both talking over it, commenting on all the characters’ choices, relationships, dialogue, hair, and makeup. Patrick doesn’t mind the commentary too much, and mostly thinks it’s funny, though he wonders how quickly David would lose his entire mind during such an experience. He’s always thought that Ray and Joon-ho are a good match just based on the fact that they’re equally annoying during movies and somehow don’t annoy one another.

Patrick likes the movie, more than he’s ever liked a romcom before, and he guesses it’s obvious why.

They order some pizza, afterwards, and while they wait for it to arrive Ray turns to him to ask how he’s doing. Patrick struggles for a moment to find any answer that doesn’t involve David.

While he’s sitting there like someone who doesn’t know how to have a conversation, Joon-ho smirks. “I know how Patrick is doing,” he says, teasingly, and Patrick freezes. Ray perks up immediately at his tone.

“Oh yes?”

“Twyla told me she saw you and David Rose through the shop window today,” Joon-ho grins. “So that’s a thing, huh?”

It’s exactly, exactly what he wished for, what he wanted, for people to see him kissing David, for it
Suddenly he remembers kids teasing him in middle school, in high school, when he dated girls: *I saw you talking to her or I saw you kissing!* It never really bothered him. It never meant anything to him. Jesus, it’s like he has to learn every single goddamn emotion over again. It’s exhausting.

“I—yeah, that’s a thing now,” Patrick agrees. Ray’s eyes light up.

“Patrick! And you came home and didn’t tell me! And Joon-ho, you knew this all day and didn’t tell me either?”

“I didn’t want to talk about Patrick behind his back,” Joon-ho protests. Ray rolls his eyes.

“I would’ve gotten you something to celebrate!” Ray says, and Patrick tries to imagine what kind of celebration gift you get for your friend slash tenant to commemorate him making out with the guy he likes for the first time.

“What, like, balloons?” Patrick asks, laughing.


“So thanks for sparing me a surprise party, Joon-ho,” Patrick says.

“Here for you, bro.”

“Though for the record I have always wanted a surprise party. Just not for this.”

“Noted,” Joon-ho smiles.

“So are there details?” Ray asks, pryingly, and Patrick holds up his hands. His instinct is to change the subject, or even tell Ray to back off. Ray would, if he did; the man can’t take a hint but he can take a clue to the head, usually.

Patrick was honest with David. It’d felt so good. He wonders if he can do it with his friends, too.

“No details,” he says, slowly, feeling his way through it. He wants to talk to them about it, he does. He licks his lips. “It’s all really new. We’re taking things slow.”

“Aw,” Joon-ho says. “That’s sweet.” He pauses, frowning, then speaks again. “Wait, does that mean—is he your—” then he blinks, cutting himself off.

Ray raises an eyebrow.

“Um,” says Joon-ho, clearly concerned he’s gone too far in sharing Patrick’s personal information. Patrick takes a deep breath. Joon-ho’s a smart guy, and Patrick has given him enough clues to figure this out. He might as well say it.

“He’s my first—uh. Guy. I’ve dated.” They’ve been on one date, which David had only known was a date for, Patrick’s guessing, maybe half of it, and then they worked together all day and made out a little. Are they dating? David said he was going to take Patrick on a date tomorrow. But *guy I’m dating* sounds better than *guy I’ve kissed more than ten times*.

“Ohhh,” Ray drawls, clearly revising his mental file on Patrick and his past. It’s only mildly upsetting to watch in real time. Amazingly, Ray has nothing else to say.
“Yeah,” Patrick continues, his voice a little hoarse. “I got to know him, and I—we just, kind of clicked. So.” He wonders if he should talk to David before telling people. But they did kiss in the store. Twyla saw. David told his sister.

He’s sweating, a little.

“Goodness,” Ray says, eventually. “But, Patrick, isn’t that a bit like . . . taking on Kilimanjaro for your first time climbing?”


“Nothing!” Ray says, hastily, darting a glance at Patrick. “He’s just—you know.” Ray pauses for a long second. “From the city.”

“That makes no sense whatsoever,” Joon-ho says, exasperated. “I’m from the city.”

“But not like, the big city.”

It’s not like Patrick’s never thought it, or like he never thought anyone else would. He and David are mismatched in a bunch of ways, but especially in this, that Patrick’s a small town guy who’s never kissed a man before and David’s worldly and experienced. It’s obvious to him, like it’s obvious to Ray, that David might get bored of him quickly.

He tries to remember David’s smile, before they left the store today, the way David had smiled like Patrick’s presence was a gift.

“And it’s not just that,” Ray goes on. His brow is furrowed, looking at Patrick, and Patrick can sense, even as his stomach turns over, that Ray is saying this from a place of caring. It doesn’t make Patrick any less upset to hear it. “He’s also, perhaps, a little bit . . . flighty. Emotional.”

Patrick hears what Ray is saying. He’s saying: David is difficult to be around. David can definitely be flighty, and emotional, and argumentative and stubborn on top of it, all of those things, and Patrick will tease him for them, but Patrick doesn’t like the idea of other people commenting on it, that people are going to think that David’s not a good—boyfriend. Or whatever.

“David’s . . . David’s been really—good. To me,” he manages to say. “He’s not hard to be with.”

He has no idea how to articulate it, that David’s been gentle in all the ways that matter, dependable in all the ways that matter. He realizes that he’s clenching his hands together, hard, pushing his right thumb against the thumb joint of his other hand.

“Well,” Ray says. His eyes dart down to Patrick’s hands. “Then I am sorry, and I take it back. You deserve someone who’s good to you, Patrick.”

“On that, we agree,” Joon-ho says. He reaches out and clasps Patrick’s knee, briefly, reassuringly.

Patrick nods. He’s some weird tangle of embarrassed and relieved and glad, and he has no idea what else to say. For some reason he feels like crying, and he doesn’t know why.

“We were going to watch Moonlight next,” Ray says, softly. “That’s Joon-ho’s pick, I haven’t seen it.”

“It’s great,” Joon-ho says. “You’ll like it.”

“Okay,” Patrick agrees. He clears his throat, then blinks away the tears prickling at the back of his
eyes. “It won the Oscar, right?”

Joon-ho nods. Patrick nods back. He’d love to be distracted, for a while.

The movie is, in fact, great. Patrick loves it. He does end up crying, a little, but so do Ray and Joon-ho, so it’s okay.

* 

Patrick gets up early again the next day, to do the hike at Roberts Point, so he misses Ray and Joon-ho in the morning. When he comes back down the mountain, feeling refreshed and full of air and energy, his phone beeps at him with texts. There’s one from his mom, with pictures of the tomatoes that are ripening in her garden, and one from Joon-ho.

Joon-ho: Driving back to Elmdale this morning, sorry I missed you. Wanted to say CONGRATULATIONS!!!

It’s followed by a bunch of party hats, noisemakers, and confetti, as if Joon-ho’s throwing him a surprise “you kissed the guy you like” party after all. Patrick smiles and texts back: Thanks with a smiley face.

Joon-ho: I just wanted you to know, I’m really happy for you and here to talk if you need someone to talk to.

Patrick’s surprised; he tends to think of needing to talk as something that happens in bad situations, when people are unhappy. Whenever he broke up with Rachel, that’s when people asked him if he needed to talk. He’s never had someone offer to talk when he was happy before.

He’s not sure when he’s ever been this happy before.

Thanks, he texts back. I appreciate that. He’s not sure what else to say, though. A minute later, as he’s fiddling with the car stereo and preparing to drive back to town, his phone buzzes again.

Joon-ho: I remember when I first came out. It was really nerve-wracking. Plus I was deadass in love with this boy and had no idea where to start.

Patrick smiles at his phone, takes his hand off of the stereo, and tosses the car keys down on the passenger seat.

Joon-ho: I remember when I first came out. It was really nerve-wracking. Plus I was deadass in love with this boy and had no idea where to start.

Patrick smiles at his phone, takes his hand off of the stereo, and tosses the car keys down on the passenger seat.

Patrick: Yeah? When was this?

Joon-ho: In undergrad. I was taking computer science and hated a lot of it. I met this guy in French class and I loved him so much that I followed him to one of his major classes in linguistics the next semester.

He can picture it, right down to the details, Joon-ho stealing glances at the boy during classes, feeling a thrill when the boy clapped him on the shoulder or smiled at him. He can picture it because he can also, to some extent, remember it, with Jason and with Peter, that lovesick feeling. He feels a little pang of loss, that he didn’t know it for what it was at the time.

Joon-ho tells him the rest of the story over text, as Patrick encourages him with emojis and incredulous questions. Joon-ho and the boy got together, and didn’t stay together, but it’s a nice story to hear even if it doesn’t have a happy ending.

Joon-ho: So anyway, I was upset at the time, but I know now how important it was to go through
that. I learned a lot about myself. Plus it got me into linguistics

Patrick: I’m glad you had that

Joon-ho: So what about you? How’s it going with David?

Patrick stares at that text, suddenly realizing that he’s still sitting in his car, still sweaty from his hike, still supposed to be on his way home so he can get to work. He’s going to be late.

Patrick: Good so far! Gotta go rn, back later

He lets his head fall back against the head rest and lets his arms collapse down into his lap, so his phone is on his thighs instead of in front of him. It beeps again, a couple of times, and Patrick closes his eyes tight.

Then he drives himself home, and showers, and barely makes it in to the store in time for opening.

David’s out meeting with some new potential vendors, and there aren’t many customers in early on a Sunday, so Patrick gets some paperwork done, and looks at sales projections, and tidies up and restocks and then it’s 11am and he’s still on his own with his own thoughts. He drums his fingers on the counter, then takes out his phone.

Joon-ho: Ok

Joon-ho: Sorry, didn’t mean to push

There are more texts from his mom, too, and from David, who’s out on the road. David’s texts are all epigrammatic judgments on the countryside and the farms he’s visiting, per usual, but today they feel a little different. There’s one, after David expresses his extreme disinclination to stock goat hair cheese, that just says wish you were here to experience this horror, and Patrick reads it a bunch of times, reads the wish you were here part over and over to himself. He responds to express his disgust and then manages to write wish I were there too back to David.

Then he closes his eyes tight and goes back to Joon-ho’s texts.

He can do this.

Patrick: It’s ok

Patrick: I think it’s going good. Not much data yet, honestly

Patrick: I feel like I’m dying whenever I kiss him, is that normal

He presses send on that last one before he can think better of it, then drops his phone on the counter, drops his elbows on the counter, and lets his head fall into his hands. His phone buzzes almost immediately, and he groans before picking it up to look at it.

Joon-ho: Aw

Joon-ho: Yes, it’s normal, if you’re really into him. Unless you’re experiencing numbness or chest pain, then it’s a heart attack and you should go to the hospital

Joon-ho: When are you gathering more data? This sounds scientific

Patrick forces himself to take a little breath.

Patrick: Tonight, he’s taking me out somewhere

Joon-ho: Oh cool I’ve never been. What’s the food like
He laughs out loud.

**Patrick:** It’s based on a cuisine from someplace

**Patrick:** The speciality is something, served on a bed of whatever

**Joon-ho:** lol seriously you don’t know???

**Patrick:** Nope.

**Joon-ho:** What is it like your third date?

**Patrick:** Second.

**Joon-ho:** Ok so if it’s really romantic maybe you’ll know that he’s dying whenever he kisses you too

Patrick purses his lips, embarrassed to have ever said any such thing, but glad too, that someone knows.

**Patrick:** So if he takes me to a hot dog stand?

**Joon-ho:** You’re too nice for any decent guy to ever treat that way. If he does that you call me and I’ll beat him up. Or like. I don’t know. Scold him? I could probably manage a scold

Patrick’s laughing again, and texting back with other suggestions for non-intimidating fight moves, like explaining syntax at him, when the bell rings. Patrick doesn’t look up right away, and the person comes right up to the counter.

When he does look up, it’s David.

“Who are you smiling at on your phone?” he asks. Patrick can feel a little edge of jealousy under there.

“My friend Joon-ho. He says he’ll beat you up if you don’t treat me right.”

“That’s sweet,” David says, and leans in for a soft, brief kiss. Patrick closes his eyes, reveling in it. When he opens them again, David’s smiling at him, then quickly rolling his eyes back and doing a little headshake that breaks eye contact.

“Um, is this Joon-ho, Ray’s ex-boyfriend?” He turns away to take the box he was carrying into the back room.

“Ray’s current boyfriend again,” Patrick says, and watches the tension ease out of David’s shoulders as he walks. He’s pretty sure David’s not going to take him to a hot dog stand, actually. It’s something of a relief.

“Lucky for Ray,” David says.

Then there’s a customer, and then another—the post-church crowd finally coming by—and they’re busy for most of the afternoon.

But the more Patrick thinks about it, the more nervous he is about going on a date with David. Or, not going on a date with him, per se, but going on a date that David planned. He can’t predict what that might be, not at all. In *People* they had sometimes showed David helicoptering places with actors or models he was seeing, or eating at ridiculously expensive New York restaurants; if David
still had money, Patrick can imagine the kind of date he might’ve planned for them.

Of course, if David still had money, he probably wouldn’t be dating Patrick. Which is a thought for another day, definitely, or for never, if he can avoid it.

But without helicopters and fancy food, sudden jet trips to Monaco or whatever, Patrick can’t imagine what David will do.

“So, what should I be wearing, for this date?” Patrick asks, when there’s finally a lull.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Yes, I would like to know, that’s the reason I asked. So that I don’t show up to a rodeo in a three-piece suit.”

“First of all, if you have a three-piece suit, please tell me more about it, and yes, wear it tonight, I would like to see that.”

“Noted.” Patrick had a three-piece suit, once; it’d been intended for his wedding. He had not packed it when he left. He figures by now it’s been snapped up at the Value Village or the church rummage sale or something.

“Secondly, if you’re anticipating that I will take you to a rodeo, it may be that there are going to be a lot of surprises for you as we continue to date.”

“Now I really want to take you to a rodeo.”

“Unfortunately for you, I am planning this date. There won’t be any . . . rodeoing.”

“Have to wait for our third date for you to rope me a steer, then.”

David sighs. “I really think you’re making these terms up.”

Patrick breaks, laughs, and David does the thing where he suppresses a smile so hard that it’s much more endearing than if he had actually smiled.

“So, no clues, then? Just that a cowboy hat is probably inappropriate?”

Shuddering, David shakes his head. “Always. Just assume that’s true always.”

Patrick takes a step forward, closing the distance between them. He’s having a thought, a vision, between remembering getting fitted for that suit and thinking about David’s attention to detail when it comes to clothes.

“So you’re telling me you don’t want to dress me?” He pitches his voice a little low. He can’t believe he’s saying it. They’ve only ever kissed.

It has its intended result, though. He doesn’t miss the moment when David’s eyes darken and flick down over Patrick’s chest, his hips, his legs, then back up again. It makes Patrick feel good, hot, desired. He wants to find other things to say that make David look at him like that, all kinds of things to make him lose control and rake his gaze over Patrick’s body.

David opens his mouth to speak, hesitating. “I’d say something about undressing you first, but we’re not doing that yet,” he drawls, eventually.

Patrick’s whole body lights up at that one word, that desire, that expectation: yet.
The bell rings above the door, and a customer comes in, followed by another two people in quick succession.

“What you normally wear is fine,” David says, clearing his throat. “You always look nice.”

Patrick puts down the box he was unpacking, taking a step back in preparation for going over to one of the customers to help them. “Aw, you’re saying you like my clothes?” It’s an attempt to lighten the mood, but David’s eyes are still dark, his face still serious.

“No. I’m saying I like how you look in them.” David’s tone is quiet and deeply, deeply sexual, despite the comment itself being so mild and, also, vaguely insulting. There’s something about the way he says it that makes Patrick’s heart throb in his chest. He wants to kiss him so badly.

David turns and walks over to one set of customers, leaving Patrick to deal with the others.

Patrick chats with them about honey varieties, not thinking too much about what he’s saying, his mind spinning in circles. When David’s around he feels like he’s in way over his head, drowning, the pressure of the water closing in around him; but at the same time like he’s crawling through a waterless desert, reaching for any oasis mirage that might flutter on the horizon. He wants David’s attention back on him, and he’s grateful for the break from it, too. He hates that he doesn’t know what he’s feeling from one minute to the next, much less why, and at the same time he loves the adrenaline rush of it, like the exhausted, agonizing push at the end of a close game.

It’s a while before they’re alone again, and by then, Patrick has himself back under control. He thinks.

It’s after closing, so David flips the sign and locks the door. Then he runs his hand over Patrick’s shoulder, gently.

“You, uh. You okay?” he asks. “Did I say something—”

He doesn’t finish, because Patrick kisses him quiet. It’s a long, hot, soft kiss, and it’s a while before Patrick pulls back again.

“I like how you look, too,” he says, voice as steady as he can make it.

“Oh,” David says. His hands, which had been gently cupping Patrick’s shoulders, rubbing back and forth, still suddenly. Patrick waits, but David doesn’t say anything else.

“So, no cowboy hat,” he jokes, wanting to escape from the tension that he caused. “A snorkel, maybe? A kilt? Bunny outfit?”

“All of those at once could be entertaining,” David concedes, pulling away, smiling.

They finish closing up procedures, then David takes his hand, pulls him in close, and kisses him again. “Pick you up at seven-thirty?” he asks, when they break apart. He’s still holding Patrick’s hand; they’re not kissing anymore, so it means they’re just standing together, holding hands.

“Provided I can get the viking costume back from the drycleaner’s in time,” Patrick says, breathless.

* 

“Going out for the evening?” Ray asks, archly, as he sees Patrick walking towards the shoe rack.

Patrick nods. “Got a date,” he says, the words making him feel odd, uncomfortable.
“And that’s what you’re wearing?”

Patrick looks down at his dark navy blue button-down and slacks. “Yes?”

Ray tsks. “He’s seen you in that.”

“He’s seen me in everything. I don’t have a lot of clothes.”

“What about that green number? Button-up, with the short sleeves.”

Patrick has to concentrate to remember what shirt he’s talking about; he never wears it. He realizes that Ray now knows the contents of his wardrobe better than he does.

Hesitating, Patrick thinks about the shirt: it’s kind of tight around the arms and shoulders. If he’s obviously dressed differently, he might look desperate, or weird, or like he’s trying to be someone else. He does want David to look at him some more, though, the way he looked at him today. He does want David to notice, to reach out to touch the sleeve, to say you look very nice, the way he had on their first date. He wants a chance to say thank you back, instead of cracking a joke.

Patrick runs back upstairs and swaps out the navy blue for the green. It is a little tight, pulls across his shoulders; he looks in the mirror and wonders if that’s good, if David will like that. I like how you look in your clothes, David said. After a minute, Patrick takes off his slacks, too, and puts on jeans instead. They’re his tightest pair. Just thinking about that is a little mortifying, the idea that he’s dressing on purpose to give David a view of his ass, his arms. But he likes the idea too much to change back.

Ray wolf-whistles at him as he heads to the shoe rack a second time, which makes Patrick feel embarrassed and glad all at once.

“Much better,” Ray says.

“Okay, okay,” Patrick grouses.

David picks him up in his family’s Lincoln, which makes it very much like a high school date, except Patrick’s never been the one picked up before. He’s been a passenger while Rachel drove, but it’s not the same thing.

David waits until Patrick’s door is closed and his seatbelt is on, then leans over, puts his hand on Patrick’s knee, and kisses him hello.

“Hi,” Patrick says, at the end of it.


“Thank you,” he manages, but then can’t help but push it. “Because of what I’m wearing or because of how I look in what I’m wearing?”

“Both,” David says. “Mostly the second one.”

David himself is wearing a mostly-white sweater with a swoop of black over one shoulder, and black jeans with holes in the knees. Patrick wonders if they’re his tightest jeans, too, if David thought about that while getting dressed.

“You look good too,” Patrick says. He touches David’s knee, like David touched his, but in his case it means touching bare skin through the gap in the material. Just touching his fingertips to David’s
bare knee feels daring.

“Thank you,” David says, voice low.

Then neither of them says anything, and Patrick keeps touching David’s skin.

“Don’t stretch out the fabric,” David says, after a minute. Patrick draws his hand back.

“Um,” he says.

“No, I just meant—well.” David breathes out through his nose. “Probably better this way. I have to drive, after all.”

Patrick feels a smile come over his face. “Aw,” he says. “Am I distracting?”

“Very much so,” David says, signaling and watching the road as he pulls out. He says it offhandedly, like he’s not thinking about it. It makes Patrick feel glad, deep in his body, glad in his muscles and bones and blood.

“Then I shall take care to restrain myself and my stupendous powers,” he says.

“I mean, I’m not saying I’ll crash if you put your hand on my knee while we drive. It’s—I would say it’s quite safe, in fact.”

“Oh, no, I don’t want to create any risk.”

“Then I think you’ll find you’ll encounter few rewards, as well.”

Patrick and his Business Administration degree can’t really argue with that. David smirks at him, sidelong, then gets his eyes back on the road. Patrick hasn’t ridden with him before, he realizes; they’re always splitting up for things like vendor runs and errands, because someone has to be at the store all the time. Watching David drive is a bit like watching David work his way carefully through an inventory spreadsheet: he’s focused, deliberate, even a bit slow. He doesn’t roll through stop signs or forget to signal.

Patrick’s a little disgusted at himself for how much he finds that endearing. But he does; he’s endearred; he’s fucking charmed by the sight of David looking left, then right, then left again, before going through an intersection.

As they get further out of town, the woods close around them, until the road and the occasional farmhouse are the only signs of human habitation. It’s summer in northern Ontario, so the sun will be up for a few more hours, but it feels still and quiet.

“So, you’re taking me to murder me in the woods, is what I’m getting,” Patrick says. David smiles.

“Please, I would never murder anyone in the woods.”

“I’m upset that the woods are the part you objected to, there.”

“I promise not to murder you at all on our second date,” David says firmly.

“Would really love it if you’d leave off the qualifiers entirely.”

He watches David’s careful, attentive driving for another minute, then reaches out and puts his hand on David’s knee, again. David spares him a smile.
“It’s really our first and a half date,” Patrick says, after a while. “You didn’t know our first date was a date.”

“It was a confusing social situation! You didn’t tell me! And also, I knew. That’s why I kissed you.”

“You brought a friend along because you knew it was a date?” Patrick can’t believe he’s teasing David over this, when a couple days ago it’d been the source of so much turmoil for him. David makes him reckless; David has always made him reckless. The fun of their back-and-forth outweighs any potential embarrassment.

“Okay, no, but I knew it was a date as soon as Stevie left. Like, five minutes in. So. That’s plenty to count as a whole date.”

“When Stevie left,” Patrick repeats.

“Uh-huh.”

“So you knew it was a date because . . . ?”

“Because Stevie told me,” David admits, grudgingly. Patrick laughs; he loves it; he loves that he couldn’t say it, and David couldn’t think it, but Stevie was perfectly willing to point it out.

“Remind me to get Stevie something nice,” Patrick says. David’s leg shifts as he moves to brake slightly for a blinking yellow light. He doesn’t have to brake; it’s just a precaution, for the intersection. No other cars are around. Patrick’s hand moves with his knee.

“Trust me, she won’t appreciate it.”

They drive a little further. David signals, well in advance, and then makes a turn, from pavement onto a gravel road.

“Just want to check in again about the being murdered thing,” Patrick says, apprehensively.

“If we were in a horror movie, I would clearly be the first of us to be killed, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“I choose to worry about you getting killed,” Patrick objects. “Also, how come you get killed first?”

David rolls his eyes. “The cute femme ones always go early. Boys and girls.”

Patrick’s never heard that before, never heard anyone refer to themselves as *femme*. He’s not even a hundred percent sure what it means, but he likes it. He squeezes David’s knee, trailing his fingertips over the skin, careful of the fabric.

“You don’t think I’m cute?” He thinks about Steven and his range of lipsticks; he wonders if that’s a different kind of femme from David’s kind.


Patrick thinks about that image; it’s fair, he decides, there’s no denying it, but. It’s not all he wants to be.

He doesn’t know, yet, what he does want to be.

David turns again, into a private driveway this time, and Patrick feels his mouth fall open in surprise
when he sees the huge old house, the gazebo, the porch that looks out on a little lake. Everything is
covered with fairy lights. There are a bunch of cars in a small parking lot, and people wandering the
gardens near the house. Based on signage and the grape vines they drive past, Patrick gathers that it’s
a winery.

“Stonebrook Farms,” he reads off of the sign. “Oh, hey.” It’s where the wine at the store comes
from; Patrick’s never been out here.

“They have a restaurant that’s only open for dinner a few months a year. Luckily Marianne was
willing to get us a table on short notice.”

Patrick smiles, recognizing the tactics from the guy who’d taken his dates on helicopter rides and
trips to Monaco; David used connections and charm, this time, instead of money, to do something
special for them. But the grand gesture of it, the pleasure in doing something exclusive, was the
same.

“It’s beautiful,” Patrick says, because he can’t quite bring himself to say, _you’re beautiful_. David
looks pleased anyway.

“Our reservation’s not for another half an hour. I thought—um, I thought you might like to walk
around the grounds?”

It’s deeply, obviously romantic; Patrick feels a lump in his throat, remembering what Joon-ho said. “I
would love to,” he says.

As they walk up the slope towards the gardens, Patrick thinks about taking David’s hand; about
whether David would want him to take his hand; about whether he wants all these strangers to see
him holding David’s hand; about whether it’s safe. He thinks about it until the sandy path takes them
to a wild, bright, colourful field of flowers, and then he takes David’s hand. David looks surprised,
for a moment, then his expression softens and he squeezes back in affirmation.

Patrick blushes, but doesn’t look away from David’s eyes; David doesn’t look away, either.

He thinks about what David said in the car, about being one of the _cute femme ones_, about how
David had called him _butch_ before they ever even got together. He’s not sure how to feel about any
of that, yet.

“There’s more around the back of the property,” David is saying, pointing with the hand that isn’t
currently swinging easily between them.

“I’m gay,” Patrick says, quietly, but loud enough, he thinks. David turns to him, eyebrows raised.

“Ohay,” David says, softly. His glance darts down to where they’re holding hands, as if to say, _it’s
fairly obvious._

“I just—I wanted you to know that.” Patrick doesn’t know what else to say, how to explain why it’s
important.

“All right,” David says. There’s a pause, and then he adds, “If it, uh. If it matters to you, I guess I
should tell you that I’m . . . not. I mean, I know we talked about me and Stevie, but I wasn’t sure
if—”

“Ray said you were pansexual,” Patrick blurts out, interrupting, and David goes stiff, his grip on
Patrick’s hand suddenly tight.
“This was during one of the times that Ray was sharing general town gossip with you,” David says. He doesn’t sound comfortable with it. Patrick’s heart breaks, a little; he knows that feeling, that fear, of being talked about unkindly, of being a spectacle. He squeezes David’s hand, like David had before, trying to be reassuring.

“So, I should probably tell you that Ray and I only ever discussed your love life in the context of me having an obvious, um. Crush on you and Ray wanting to make me feel better about it,” Patrick confesses, all in a rush. “I’m not sure it’s quite the lively topic of general discussion that I might’ve implied.” Actually, Ray made it sound like it was a topic of general discussion, but Patrick got the feeling that no one bothered to talk about it anymore. Old news, just another new queer person in town. It seems to Patrick that there are a lot of queer people in town.

“Oh. Um, okay,” David says, nodding. His grip loosens, a little, and they start walking again. “How—how obvious a crush?”

“We don’t really need to go into that,” Patrick says quickly.

David grins like a shark and his voice goes into hard uptilt mode, teasing, aggressively interrogative.

“And, um, when was this? Exactly?”

Because Patrick doesn’t want to say five minutes after I met you, he says, “Wow, look at the time. When was that reservation again?” He walks forward quickly, pulling David with him.

“Oh, not for a while yet,” David assures him. Then he quirks a smile and tugs on Patrick’s hand to get him to stop walking, then tugs on Patrick’s hand again, to reel him in, then kisses him in the warm evening sun, in the light glinting off the lake, surrounded by other people.

“You can talk to me about, uh. About being gay,” David says, mouth close to his. “I can listen.”

Patrick kisses him again, briefly, gratefully. “I’m okay. It just felt important. To tell you. I don’t want you to think—I’m not—I’m not just window shopping, here.” His voice sounds low and hoarse to his own ear.

David’s eyes go wide.

Patrick can feel his heart thumping fast and hard in his chest, so he licks his lips and adds, “I didn’t want you thinking that no murderers would want to kill me.”

“Oh.” David takes a quick breath and gets on board, nodding seriously. “So you’re arguing, in fact, that you’re gayer than me, and therefore get killed first.”

“If the murderer saw you kissing a girl, he might give you a pass, is all I’m saying.”

“Um, that’s panphobic,” David says. “Trust me, every time I’ve kissed a girl, it’s been queer.” Patrick grins; he doesn’t quite understand that, but he absolutely believes it.

“And anyway,” David goes on, “The murderer’s not going to see me kissing any girls.” He says it offhandedly, but with complete confidence.

“Oh.” Patrick hadn’t thought about that.

David swallows, seeming to realize what he’s just implied, then looks away. “I mean, I’m not seeing anyone else, and—I just thought, maybe for right now? It’d just be you and me? Unless you’re—I mean, you’re all, new, so maybe you want to, of course you should—”
“I want it to just be you and me,” Patrick says, interrupting him. “I want that.” Patrick can barely handle kissing one guy, this one guy; he has no idea how he’d manage more.

Letting out a breath, David nods. “Okay. Okay. You’ll—let me know if that changes. You can change your mind, about that.”

It’s like when David says thank you for all your help to a contractor or the insurance guy, the practiced way he has to remind himself to go against his instincts, to say the right thing. Patrick doesn’t know how to answer it, so he nods and swings David’s hand between them.

They make their way around the back of the house, where there’s a long wooden fence. Patrick’s eye is drawn by movement, swift and smooth. When he realizes what he’s looking at, he laughs.

“Horses!” he exclaims. “How ‘bout that.”

“Not quite the rodeo,” David says, pursing his lips against a smile.

“I can’t believe you didn’t let me bring a cowboy hat,” Patrick says, shaking his head.

“You can’t, like, ride them or anything,” David says, as if Patrick is so country that he’d leap right up on a horse as soon as he saw one.

“Well, no,” Patrick says. “They’re not even saddled, and nobody wants to ride bareback.”

David has a small coughing fit, and Patrick suddenly remembers those Brokeback Mountain jokes. “No, nobody wants that,” David agrees, eventually.

“Shut up,” Patrick laughs, embarrassed. “Come on.” He walks up to the fence, and because David is still holding his hand, he ends up dragging David behind him.

“Um, are we sure that it’s . . . safe? I mean, are these like, good . . . pet . . . horses? Or?”

“It’s fine, David, come on.” Patrick pulls on his hand, and David comes along reluctantly. A rambunctious young mare comes up near the fence, probably looking for treats, and Patrick reaches up with his free hand to stroke the white blaze on her forehead. She blows out air through her nose, forcefully, and David steps back.

“We can wash our hands before dinner,” Patrick reassures him. “Come here.”

David sighs and steps up to pet the horse. His fingers move gently against her coat, and then he scratches below her ear, and she leans into it like a dog. David makes a small, pleased sound, and keeps scratching. Patrick watches, feeling strange, tender.

“I’m surprised you didn’t have horses, growing up.”

“Mm, we were not that kind of rich.”

Patrick looks at him, surprised. “I thought you had, like, a jet—”

“No no no, I mean, we were more . . . indoor rich. New money. Not like. Landed gentry. Alexis actually did have horses for a while when she was about . . . eight? But she never went to see them or ride them and Dad sold them off eventually.”

It’s one of the first times that David’s really talked about his pre-Schitt’s Creek past with him. Patrick licks his lips.
“So you never went out riding on your own?” Patrick can’t imagine it, being thirteen and having that kind of escape, that kind of freedom, and not taking it.

“No. I ran away from home in other ways,” David says, and Patrick blinks in surprise, that David was thinking the same thing he was, about escape.

“We didn’t have horses, but I went riding a lot, as a kid,” Patrick says. “My friend grew up on a farm, and his parents let him breed his own little herd, so he would lend me a horse for 4-H rides and stuff.”

“And you—liked that?”

“Loved it,” Patrick says. Just the smell of horse and hay and manure takes him back to those times, riding next to Mike in the sunshine, the way he felt comfortable and calm on horseback, knowing what he was supposed to be doing and how to do it.

David pets the horse a little more, tentatively, then draws his hand back. “Ew,” he says, at the hair and dirt on his hand.

“Let’s go find the restroom,” Patrick says.

Dinner is delicious, and clearly up to even David’s standards, as he barely makes fun of anything on the menu, and doesn’t squint in pain when the food arrives. He says he’s stopping after one glass of wine, but he encourages Patrick to order a second one, to try some of the ones they don’t carry in the store.

“I’m driving, go wild,” he says, gesturing expansively at the wine list.

“Trying to get me liquored up to have your way with me?” Patrick says.

“Um,” David says. Then he says, “No.”

Patrick feels like a complete asshole.

“Sorry. I’m sorry. That—that was a bad joke.”

“Yeah,” David says, looking down at the wine list. Patrick’s heart is in his throat, his mind racing.

“I’m nervous,” he says, and David looks up at him.

“I know,” he says, expression softening. “I know that, I’m sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Patrick says. He reaches across the table for David’s hand; David opens it for him, fingers unfurling to make space for Patrick to hold on. He’s starting to get used to it, this simple way of putting their bodies together.

A woman comes up to their table, then, not their server. “David! I was so glad to hear you were coming by tonight!”

“Hi, Marianne,” David says easily, clearly unconcerned to be seen holding hands with him in front of one of their vendors. “Have you met Patrick?”

Patrick has to let go of David’s hand, then, to offer it to Marianne to shake. “Nice to meet you. I’ve loved all the wines we’ve been carrying at the store.”

“Oh,” Marianne says. “So you’re the business partner?”
“Among, uh. Other things,” Patrick agrees, not sure whether he’s allowed to say boyfriend and feeling like also the romantic partner is way too much.

“Oh, um, okay. I see!” Marianne says, smiling. “Well, we’re very happy to have you as clients. Can I bring you something special? It’s not on the menu but we have a bottle of the 2010 Riesling I’d be happy to open for you. Gold medal winner, not that many left.”

Patrick’s about to say no when David nods. “That would be lovely, thank you,” he says. “Two glasses, please.” Marianne nods and heads off to the kitchen.

Smiling, Patrick goes back to his fish. It’s lake trout, local, delicious.

“Thought you were driving,” he says.

“One more glass of wine should be all right. It just means we’ll have to stay for dessert.”

“Oh no.” Patrick smiles at him, and David ducks his head, pleased. Patrick wants to watch him eat dessert, and drink wine, and wants to hold his hand, and doesn’t want the night to stop.

They eat, and talk about the store, David’s family, Patrick’s baseball team, other little Schitt’s Creek things that they usually talk about. Eventually the server comes to take away their empty plates, and across the newly cleared table, there’s a lull in their conversation.

“What were the other ways?” he asks, into that quiet space. At David’s puzzled look, he adds, “The other ways you ran away from home. Since you didn’t jump on a horse and ride to freedom.”

“Oh,” David says, and nods his head quickly, dabbing his mouth with his napkin. He looks a little uncomfortable.

“Sorry, you don’t have to talk about it. If you don’t want to.” Patrick wants him to, though; Patrick wants to hear more about this thing they have in common, the urge to escape. He wants to hear every single story about David running away.

“Um, it’s okay. I guess this is—date stuff, huh? Where you talk a lot about your—past?”

“Dating does traditionally involve getting to know the other person better,” Patrick says, biting on a smile. “David, don’t you usually . . . date people?” Even as he asks the question he’s embarrassed, because Patrick realizes that the answer could very well be no, I just fuck them, which he wouldn’t know how to reply to. Asking David to go slow already makes him feel like he’s a little behind, the rube to David’s sophisticate, and it’s frustrating.

“Uh, yes, of course,” David says, looking put out. “I just—it’s a kind of intimate question.”

Patrick imagines all the helicopters and fancy dinners and sailboats on the French Riviera and figures it’s pretty easy to talk about nothing, in places like that. Well. And helicopters are probably too loud to talk in.

“I ran away from home when I was six,” Patrick offers.

“How The Littlest Hobo of you,” David says. “I feel like a wandering dog should’ve befriended you.” Patrick smiles, and David smiles, and then adds, “Um. That sounds very cute.”

It is. It’s not the story about skipping school for the first time in his life at 16, when he was supposed to be taking a math exam and coordinating a youth leadership retreat for 4-H, when instead he got drunk with the shop kids under an abandoned train trestle in the woods. It’s not the story about
breaking up with Rachel in second year university and driving to Winnipeg for a week with no money in his pocket. And it’s not the story about the summer after he graduated, when he’d broken up with Michelle and then turned down three separate job offers, all jobs he’d applied and interviewed for. He spent that summer not working, and by the end of it he had no choice but to take the job with Colin. He went back to Rachel at about the same time.

He tells this story instead.

“I packed everything up into my little red wagon—”

David’s already shaking his head. “Uh-huh, no. I can’t believe you. I can’t believe you are real.”

“Teddy bear under my arm, and announced I was going. My parents said, fine, sure, have a nice life, because they thought it was funny.”

David’s eyebrow quirks, like he’s learning something about Patrick, putting pieces together, even though Patrick hadn’t meant this story for that. He feels a little hot, suddenly.

“I mean, they watched me from the window,” he adds. “It was a very quiet street in a very small town. And they watched me walk up and down the sidewalk, back and forth, for like twenty minutes before coming out to get me.”

“And . . .” David takes a sip of his wine, smiling now, maybe imagining Patrick at six years old, in high dudgeon, pacing the same block over and over.

“And I told them I was still going to run away, just as soon as someone would show up to hold my hand, since I wasn’t allowed to cross the street by myself.”

David laughs. It’s a good story, a date-story; Patrick’s told it before, on dates. It makes him look cute but fallible. It feels much more daring to tell it to David, maybe because David already knows a lot of things about him.

“What a sweet story,” David says, a little ironic twist to his words. Then he meets Patrick’s eyes.

“When was the next time you ran away?”

“Few months ago,” Patrick hears himself saying, voice hoarse. He has to look down at the table. He clears his throat.

“I, uh. I just went to boarding school,” David says quickly, and Patrick looks up. David’s biting his lip. “A performing arts high school in BC, far away from home. It’s not that complicated. Then I went to college—university—in the States, studying . . . well. Studying anything that would make me unqualified to run my father’s empire when I grew up.”

“A BFA?” Patrick guesses.

“Mm-hm.”

“And then?” Patrick asks.

“Then . . . I lived in New York. Far enough from home that I had excuses not to go back. When you’re rich you can hire someone to hold your hand and help you cross the street. And you know. Buy a lot of drugs.” He shrugs this away, like it doesn’t matter.

Patrick nods, grateful to David for telling him but wanting to break into the tension, to make a joke. “Plus, like, you have that jet.”
David purses his lips, looking away. He doesn’t like to talk about all the material possessions his family used to have; Patrick wishes he hadn’t said it.

“Escape feels good,” David says, after a long minute, surprising Patrick. “Running away feels good. It never really worked for me long-term, though. I think it’s better if you have something to run to.”

It’s real, and honest, and exactly what Patrick wanted to hear. Blowing out a breath, he smiles, nods, and takes David’s hand again. David’s thumb runs over Patrick’s knuckles, restless.

Their server comes by to offer them a dessert menu.

“Yes, thank you,” David says, using his free hand to hold it between them, so that they can lean forward over the table and both look at it at once. Patrick can’t help himself; he darts forward and kisses David’s temple, while David’s distracted by the menu.

“What’s that for?” David’s suppressing a smile, still looking at the menu.

Patrick thinks, *for holding my hand and helping me cross the street*, but it’s way too mushy to say out loud, and he can’t think of any other words he could say in response, so he squeezes David’s fingers and shakes his head.

David clears his throat. “I think I’m going to get something chocolate.”

* 

After he’s had a third glass of wine with his dessert Patrick is, in fact, feeling tipsy, and he insists on heading back out to the gardens so they don’t get back in the car right away.

“I didn’t have a third glass,” David protests, letting Patrick lead him by the hand anyway. “And I’m better at drinking than you are.”

“Weird brag, but okay,” Patrick says.

They sit down in the gazebo, overlooking the lake. The sun is finally starting to set. Patrick loves the summers here, the long lingering days that go on forever, that fill him with energy and make everything feel possible.

David kisses him, mouth eager and open, and Patrick’s surprised but he kisses back the same way, with the same passion. He thinks David might be a little tipsy after all, or else overwhelmed by the chocolate almond torte he had for dessert, because it’s the first time any of their kisses have felt this . . . well. Sexual. They kiss like that for a while, Patrick’s attention focused on David’s mouth, on sinking into the experience, on the soft wet gorgeous feeling of their lips together. The wine makes him brave, brave enough to push down the overwhelming, out-of-control feeling of his new, awake body in David’s arms. He lets himself drift, and tries not to think about it, about how much he’s feeling all at once.

Then David pulls away for a second; Patrick opens his eyes slowly. David’s face is still close to Patrick’s, his hand still cradling Patrick’s neck. He loves that sensation, God, David’s palm warm and kind, holding him steady.

“This okay?” David asks, voice low.

“Yeah,” Patrick says. “Yeah. It’s good.” He rubs his hands over David’s back, then pulls gently, reeling him back in. They kiss and kiss and kiss, there in the gazebo, in front of anyone who cares to look, framed like a picture.
After a while, David’s hand slides down from Patrick’s shoulder to his chest, and Patrick thinks about how that move on a woman would be very sexual, would be inappropriate for a relatively public setting, but on him it’s perfectly chaste. Or, he thinks that for a moment, until David’s hand cups his pec, his palm brushing again and again over Patrick’s nipple, light teasing touches that make Patrick arch forward, press against David’s hand for more. A moment later, David shifts and his thumb presses down deliberately, rubbing almost imperceptibly back and forth, making the nipple harden under him. It sends a shock through Patrick’s system, that one small touch, like a spark plug starting an engine. Patrick’s whole body turns on. He pulls back from David’s mouth.

“Whoa,” he says, and he means it like wow, but he thinks David takes it like the way you’d say it to a horse, because his hand falls away.

“You said—uh. Stealing second?”

Patrick laughs, surprised, and darts in to kiss David’s mouth again, fast. “I guess I did,” he says.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t—I just wanted—”

“Since when do you understand baseball metaphors?”

“Obviously, I looked it up, since you didn’t explain in normal words what was okay to do.”

That’s too much, too sweet, and Patrick kisses him again. “Thank you,” he says. “I’m sorry I didn’t use normal words.” He couldn’t, still can’t, couldn’t say touch my chest, take off my shirt, hold my hand, kiss my neck. He’s never said any of those things before, not when he meant them. He’s glad David’s willing to try so hard.

“Did it, um. Work for you?”

“A little too well,” Patrick says. David’s eyebrows go up and he looks annoyingly pleased with himself. Patrick thinks about David doing it again, touching him like that again, about how he felt and how his body reacted, powerfully, without his control.

“David,” Patrick says.

“Hmm?”

“Let’s—can you drive me home?”

“Okay,” David says. His voice is gravelly.

About halfway there, Patrick realizes that he might not have been clear.

“I didn’t mean, drive me home to, uh, to have sex,” he says, into the silence.


“Okay.”

It’s quiet for a little while. Outside, the sun is setting in glorious reds and purples, splashed across the horizon.

“We should have Marianne come and do a wine tasting,” Patrick says, putting his hand back on David’s knee. “At the store.”

“That’s . . . a really good idea,” David says.
“Don’t sound surprised.”

“I’m just mad I didn’t think of it first.”

David drives him right back to Ray’s, door to door service, and Patrick gets that high school feeling again, remembers waiting anxiously for girls to kiss him goodnight. This anxiety, now, is different. He leans into it, determined.

“C’mere,” he breathes, and David does, turns and scoots across the bench seat to kiss him. It’s the same hungry, open kiss from the gazebo; Patrick loves it, and answers it. Before too long, he starts to get hard, and then starts to tremble, just a little, his body full to the brim with desire and need. It’s overwhelming, shocking, the way his body feels, and he has to stop, pulling out of the kiss, pulling back.

“Okay?” David asks, a little breathless. Patrick nods. He just needs—he needs a little more control, in this situation.

“Can I,” he says, while David blinks at him in the oncoming darkness. “Can I—steal second?”

David purses his lips, clearly trying not to laugh. “No stealing required. I freely give you second base.”

“You’re not good at baseball,” Patrick says, and shuffles closer, getting his hands on David’s chest, his mouth on David’s jaw. He kisses him there, and down his throat, and over his collarbones where they’re exposed by the wide neck of his sweater, running his hands up and down David’s sides and it’s everything, everything, getting to touch and explore like this. David makes little sounds, too, little gasps that make Patrick’s breath come fast and his heart beat in his throat. He thought that doing this would make him feel more in control, but it doesn’t, it’s worse: like he wants to eat David alive.

He closes his eyes shut, hard, and holds on, face buried against David’s neck, not kissing anymore but just holding on.

After a minute, he feels David’s hands on his shoulders, stroking, then coming up to pet his hair and his neck, then back down.

“Um,” he says. “You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Patrick says, not taking his face out of David’s neck. His mouth is smooshed against David’s skin, his stubble, his words garbled. David’s laugh rumbles underneath him, and it feels good, so good, the way it moves through his body.

“Are you stuck?”

Patrick sits back up, braced on David’s shoulders, and kisses his mouth again. That’s more familiar, and it calms him down a little.

“You’re so beautiful,” Patrick whispers in the dark, against David’s stubbled cheek, eyes closed tight. His throat closes but he forces the words out anyway. “I want to touch you so much.”

“You—you can,” David says, and his voice sounds raw. “You can touch me anytime, touch me all you want—”

Patrick interrupts him, kissing him, hard and full of the pure, driving want that he feels throughout his body. He lets his hands wander again, over David’s chest, back up to his shoulders and arms, feeling the shape of him, the thickness of him. David touches him too, hesitantly, gentle little fingertip-
strokes over his shoulders, down his back.

It’s not the first time he thinks about David’s cock, about what it would look like, what it would feel like in his hand or his mouth or his ass, but it’s the first time the thought feels real, with David’s body spread out under his hands and David murmuring in his ear: touch me, you can touch me, Patrick, you can touch me, till Patrick feels dizzy and lost with it.

“God, God,” he says, when he pulls back again. He’s panting like he’s been running. “I gotta—sorry. I gotta stop.”

“That’s okay,” David says, a little distantly, looking like he just got run over by a gang of skateboarding teen hooligans. Patrick laughs, knows it’s inappropriate, covers his mouth, then laughs again.

“Sorry,” he says, again.

“Oh, it’s fine, you’re good,” David says, sitting up, tugging his sweater down where Patrick messed it up. “Just maul me and then laugh at me, I don’t mind.”

“Come here, come here,” Patrick says, drawing David’s face towards his, cupping his jaw, not touching him anywhere else. He kisses him soft, chaste, easy, over and over. David’s right hand rubs up and down his arm, shoulder to elbow, slowly, and just that simple touch makes him feel shaken, devastated.

“I gotta go,” he says, into David’s mouth, and then kisses him again, and again, and again.

“All right,” David says, after a while. “All right, so, are you going? Or are we gonna make out forever in my dad’s car like kids?”

“Making out forever sounds nice,” Patrick says. “Let’s do that on our third date.”

“What, stop time?”

“Yeah.” Patrick kisses him, kisses him, kisses him. His heart is beating so fast in his throat and his stomach is twisted up in knots and he wants to go and he also never wants to go, never wants to stop feeling the sensation of David’s mouth against his.

“God, okay, go, already,” David says, laughing, pushing him away. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Patrick grins. Catches his breath. “Goodnight, David.” In the dark, he can see that David’s mouth is wet, swollen where Patrick kissed it. His mouth feels the same way.

“Goodnight, Patrick.”

Ray’s car is parked on the street, but the lights are off, so Patrick tiptoes his way in without Ray noticing. He brushes his teeth, unable to look away from the mirror, from the plump, shocking redness of his mouth, from the irritation on his skin from David’s stubble.

He jerks off in bed, desperately, quietly as he can, thinking about fucking David in the car, thinking about leaning over and undoing David’s jeans and sucking him off, right there in the car, about David’s cock in his mouth, about David’s hands in his hair petting so softly and his cock filling up Patrick’s mouth, hot, slick, hard; he jerks himself off thinking about David’s thumb on his nipple and David’s hand around his cock, about David researching what second base means, about David driving: slowly, carefully, mindful of Patrick’s safety.
He puts his fingers in his mouth, licking and sucking, thinking about David’s cock, and then when they’re wet he touches his asshole, pushing inside just a little. He does it slow, like David would do it, gently. That thought, that sensation, push him off the edge.

After he comes he closes his eyes tight and breathes hard and slow as he can, trying not to make noise, shocked and emptied out and wild with cascading happiness.

* 

“I guess your date went well last night,” Ray says, archly, over breakfast the next morning, and Patrick thinks at first that he’s referring to Patrick jerking off the night before. He stares at Ray, shocked into silence.

“You’re whistling,” Ray clarifies.

Patrick thinks about it; he was whistling, he can hear it now. It’s that same tune again, the simple one in E major. It sounds like a ballad, like a love song. He guesses he’s happy.

“Yeah,” he says, unable to find the words to say more, but knowing that he’s smiling. “It did.”

Ray looks at him for a moment, utter fondness all over his face, then mercifully starts chatting about his latest photography clients, who are apparently demanding that Ray trek all the way to Quetico with them to take engagement pictures. Patrick listens, gratefully, making jokes at appropriate intervals, laughing along with Ray’s sardonic little observations. Ray looks sweet but he’s actually a stone-cold killer when it comes to asshole clients, which Patrick likes.

Afterwards, while Patrick’s washing the dishes, Ray pats him on the shoulder, gently.

* 

The weird thing is, while Patrick is having intense revelations about his body and his life and his relationship with David, the rest of the world just keeps happening normally, or as normally as things in Schitt’s Creek ever happen. Ronnie’s friend Alice gets in touch and sets up an appointment to meet and go over her paperwork; his mom texts him pictures of his dad on a rickety ladder trying to fix the roof, so that Patrick will call him and tell him not to anymore; Ronnie yells at him to keep his damn elbow up when he’s at bat; Jeff and Emily come over for games night with Patrick, Ray, and Joon-ho; and all through it, Patrick’s also the person David is kissing, and the person who’s kissing David. He kisses David every day, at the store or on the dates they go on: getting dinner at the café, going to Elmdale to see a movie, and it’s all normal, his normal life, except his skin is on fire when David touches him and his head is spinning when David smiles at him and his whole being is awake, alive, aware for the first time, of the ways he can feel, of all the ways his body can feel, when things are right.

He has no idea how people deal with this, how they negotiate this feeling, like he’s floating, like his heart is working double-time, like he’s the epicenter of a goddamn miracle and yet he’s still expected to take out the trash and file quarterly taxes for the store and iron his shirts.

He does manage to keep ironing his shirts, but it’s a near thing.

* 

Patrick’s at his desk at Ray’s the following Monday, when the store’s closed. He’s ostensibly working on some food safety paperwork for Heather Warner’s goat farm—he’s narrowed down his client list a lot since the store opening, but he’s still working with a few people—but in reality getting distracted by the idea of taking David on some kind of fancy date to match the winery outing David
took them on over a week ago. He feels a little competitive about it, he can recognize that, and you can only wring so much romance out of the Café Tropical and its duct-taped vinyl interiors. The thing is, the date David had planned at the winery had been very him, exclusive and fancy, and Patrick doesn’t feel like a similarly fancy dinner at a restaurant in Elmdale or Thornbridge will cut it. He thinks about other things David likes: spa treatments, tragic literary fiction with confusing intergenerational family plots, romantic comedies, celebrity gossip. They already saw the latest cute summer romcom on Saturday at the multiplex in Elmdale; Patrick had gotten up his courage and held David’s hand, and David had snuggled down against his shoulder, there in the middle of the movie theatre, where anyone could see, and Patrick still has no idea what the movie was about or who was in it. And the other things on the list are hard to plan dates around, unless Patrick goes with him to get a manicure?

At the end of each date, Patrick drove David home or else David drove Patrick home, and they made out in the car, and Patrick felt that same thing again, that shocking, overwhelming need, that trembling like his body was out of his control, that desire for David that went beyond the boundaries of anything he’s ever experienced before. He keeps waiting for the newness to wear off, for it to become normal, bearable. It hasn’t, so far.

Each time he pulled away and told David to stop, and David pet his hair or his shoulder and looked at him with bright eyes and nodded and let him leave. He had to be getting frustrated. Patrick wants to take him somewhere special, to do something special for him.

He’s thinking about this, and not about Heather’s goat farm, and not about the time, which is how he’s surprised when a woman walks into the house and asks Ray if he’s got someone called Patrick hidden away here.

“Oh, you—you must be Alice,” Patrick says, getting up suddenly, shoving aside the paperwork he was working on for Heather.

“And you’re Patrick.” She shakes his hand, looking bemused. She’s wearing a floral sundress and matching cardigan that remind him a little of Rachel, though her hair is a lot shorter and darker. “Did I get the wrong day?”

“No, no, I was thinking and I lost track of time.” He gestures her into the other chair.

“Oh. Well, I do that sometimes too. Hyperfocus.” She gestures airily at her temple, as if to say, brains, what can you do. “Sometimes useful, but sometimes a real pain in the ass.”

Patrick smiles; he likes her already, how she’s direct and a little self-deprecating. He can see why she and Ronnie might get along. “I guess that’s true. Anyway, sorry, let me just grab your file.” He pulls it out of the filing drawer and sits down across from her.

“Ronnie said you might be able to help cut through some of the layers of bullshit and red tape.”

“Ronnie also told you that I’ve never done this kind of work before, right? The VAC is not my area of expertise.”

“She did, yeah. But frankly at this point I’ll take any help I can get, especially with such reasonable rates.”

Patrick grins. “I can guarantee work commensurate with the fee, that’s for sure,” he says.

They talk through the paperwork for a while, with Patrick laying out a timeline for various forms and processes, where to send stuff, what she’ll need for each part of the process. He’d spent over an hour
on the phone with the VAC helpline, but hearing directly from Alice gives him a better idea of the barriers she’s facing. Patrick’s exhausted just hearing about the process she’s gone through so far.

“Oh hey, sorry, I forgot to offer you something to drink,” Patrick says, after about half an hour. “We have coffee? Sparkling water?”

“Coffee would be great, actually,” Alice says, sitting up straight and stretching a little; they’d both been bent over the paperwork.

Patrick pours, brings her the sugar she requests, and sits back down.

“So what’d Ronnie do for you, that you owed her this favour? Unless you enjoy banging your head against bureaucracy as something to do in your spare time.”

“It’s not that I don’t enjoy helping you? But yeah, Ronnie expedited my, uh. My boyfriend’s business license.”

He hasn’t used the word boyfriend around David yet, but he’s been using it in his head. It makes him feel all flushed and strange, just to say it out loud to someone.

“Oh, check. That’s how she gets you.”

“It is?” Patrick laughs. “She didn’t even ask for a favour for herself.”

“No, no, that’s how—wait, you’re new in town, aren’t you.”

“Yup.”

“Well, Ronnie isn’t. She grew up here. You ever wonder why there are so many queer people in Schitt’s Creek? Why the trans population here is five times any other—pardon the phrase—crappy town in the area? How they built their businesses and families here, and felt safe to do it?”

Patrick’s kind of ashamed, because he hasn’t really wondered that. The LGBTQ2AI-plus shindigs were here, waiting for him, when he arrived. He’s been so glad for them, and for the people he’s found to talk to, that he hasn’t spent time thinking about how the tradition got started.

“I’m guessing you’re going to tell me it was Ronnie,” he hazards.

Alice grins. “Damn right it was Ronnie. She fought hard for that seat on town council. It took her three elections to get it, but she’s had it since the late nineties, and when word got around there was a black lesbian on the Schitt’s Creek council, looking out for people, more queers from the area started turning up. And it didn’t matter to Ronnie if she liked them or not, if she had anything in common with them or not, she made opportunities happen for them.”

“Wow,” Patrick says. He thinks about it, how you build community in a small town like this, how you’d make sure people knew each other, and knew they could count on one another. The socializing stuff would be part of it—the shindigs, the baseball—but . . . “Ronnie didn’t need me to help you with your paperwork.”

“Ronnie’s great at cutting through red tape, plus her wife’s a veteran too,” Alice says, smiling. Patrick shakes his head.

“But she asked me to do it instead. And now we know each other,” Patrick says.

“Mm-hm. Connections. Support networks. Maybe in the future, if you need something, you’ll give
Patrick’s mind is spinning. He’s thinking, too, about David’s business license, how Ronnie’s favour gave David’s store a leg up by making sure he could open earlier and start recouping what he was paying on the lease. And about Karen putting in a good word for him with the Women’s Business Association, as soon as he got here—how his client list expanded so rapidly. “She—how the hell does she do all this?”

“Fuck me if I know,” Alice laughs.

Grinning, Patrick nudges her with an elbow. “So how’d she get you?”

Alice takes a sip of her coffee. “I moved here from Elm Valley a while back. My friend Olivia lives here, and she knows Ronnie, and Ronnie said she could get me a job driving for Karen’s gravel business. I was chronically out of work, before. It’s not like cis gay people aren’t ever transphobic, God knows, but at least someone here hired me. No one would, back in my hometown.”

“Wow,” Patrick says. He gropes for the right thing to say. “I’m glad this was here for you, then.”

“Me too.”

“Well, now that I know, I’ll have to . . . offer up my services to Ronnie’s consortium more often.” He likes the idea, of being useful, being dependable.

Alice taps her finger on the paperwork still littering the desk. “Do mine first, though.”

Patrick huffs a laugh, and they work through the rest of it. It’s a lot of bullshit to handle, but eventually they have a solid plan, and Patrick’s got all the information he needs to start filing the first set of documents.

“We’ll get it figured out,” he says, sighing, rubbing his forehead. “If I have to drive down to Ottawa myself and make a scene.”

“So dramatic,” Alice says. “Your boyfriend must have his hands full.”

“Ha. I’ll tell him you said that, he’ll think it’s really funny.”

“I bet. You two been together long?”

Patrick shakes his head. “I was actually just thinking of where we should go on our . . . sixth? Date? I think? It’s hard to find fun things to do around here.”

“Right? The rent’s cheap, but it’s not exactly the Montreal night scene.” She pauses, then adds, “There’s a meteor shower tomorrow night, though. Take a blanket, lie in the grass. Easy romance. I’m taking my girlfriend.”

It’s the kind of thing Patrick would’ve done with Rachel, that Rachel would’ve loved: something simple, outdoorsy, romantic. It’s a lot more Patrick’s style than going for a manicure, that’s for sure. “David’s not really the type to . . . enjoy nature,” he says, frowning.

Alice smiles. “Heh. Neither is my girlfriend. But I love it, and sometimes she’s gotta share my interests, right?” She waves a hand. “Anyway. I wish you luck on that one. Maybe Ronnie can expedite someone’s business license to start a gay club, or something.”

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees. He’s never been to a gay club, has only seen them on TV. “That’d be good.”
“I’d better get going, but thanks for all your help.”

“No problem,” Patrick says. “I’m happy to have been a cog in Ronnie’s machine with you.”

“Same. Maybe I’ll see you at the LGBTQ2AI-plus night?”

“Yeah, sounds good.” Patrick realizes that the next LGBTQ2AI-plus night is that upcoming Saturday; the weeks have slipped by so fast, since he’s gotten involved with David.

She leaves, and Ray looks up from the real estate listings he’s going through. “You knew all that, about Ronnie?” Patrick asks, because there’s no way Ray wasn’t eavesdropping on their conversation.

“Oh, sure. She’s ruthless. She once made me repay a favour by running for town council,” Ray says, not looking up. “Said together we’d make the council gayer and browner. She wasn’t wrong! I had to resign after a few terms, though, it really wasn’t for me, and I wanted to focus on some new business ideas.”

“Huh,” Patrick says. A few terms is twelve years, he’s pretty sure. “What was the favour? Must’ve been huge.”

“She cosigned a bank loan for me, to start my first business,” Ray says. Now he looks up, and smiles. “And, not to put too fine a point on it, but she really didn’t know me at the time.”

“Huh,” Patrick says, again.

* *

“Uh, so, I’m going to have to ask now if you’re going to murder me,” David says, hesitantly. They’re parked in a field that Jeff recommended, far from the lights of the town and—Patrick hopes, Jeff wasn’t clear—not trespassing on private property. If they are trespassing, the owner is nowhere around, so it probably doesn’t make much difference.

“I like you fine alive,” Patrick replies, shutting off the car, but leaving the lights on. It’s late, and already dark outside. They’ll need the lights to set up.

“When you said midnight date, I thought, sure, okay, that sounds exciting and sexy.” David glances up at Patrick’s eyes nervously, then back down, and clears his throat. “I thought, maybe Patrick knows a cool place to go to, some club or bar or something that miraculously exists nearby. But we seem to be in a field. With . . . dirt.”

“You’re very perceptive. We are in a field.”

“So if you’re not going to murder me, the bugs will.”

Patrick kisses him quickly. “I brought the all-natural essential oil citronella bug spray from the store.”

“Hmm,” David says, sounding a little less skeptical.

He sets up under the headlights, the blanket, the LED lamp, the citronella spray, the wine, the chocolates. Once the lamp is on, he turns out the car lights.

“Uh,” David says. “So, it’s too late for a picnic and there’s nothing here—”

“Lie down with me,” Patrick says, getting on the blanket. David does, slowly, stretching his body out beside him. In that moment, Patrick realizes how this looks. He was so excited about doing this
with David, he didn’t really think it through, think about what it would look like.

It looks like a . . . a sex date. He lies on his back, looking up, and tries not to dig his hands into the ground beneath them.

“So what now?” David asks, his voice soft and husky. He’s lying on his side, propped up on an elbow, leaving a good foot of space between him and Patrick.

Patrick checks his watch. It should be happening by now. “Now we look up,” he says, and turns off the LED lamp. Total darkness descends on them, except for the wild, rich blanket of stars in the sky.

As his eyes adjust, he feels, rather than sees, David turn onto his back.

“Wow,” he says, softly. “I didn’t know there were so many.”

“Really?” Patrick asks, because he’s lived in small, rural places all his life, far from the big city light pollution. This deep, pulsating, uncountable starfield is what he’s grown up with, and they only had to drive fifteen minutes out of Schitt’s Creek to see it.

“Really,” David breathes. It strikes Patrick that maybe he’s too overcome by the sight to crack a joke or say something self-deprecating, which is rare. “Thank you for showing me this.”

Patrick slaps at a mosquito on his arm, then spritzes himself with some of the citronella spray. He hands it to David, who does the same.

“So we’re stargazing,” David says. Patrick shakes his head.

“There’s more. Wait for it.” He shuffles a little closer to David, so that their heads are sitting on almost the same point on the planet, and then points up, asking David to follow the line of his arm. “Right up there.”

“Right up there, what?”

“Well, you have to wait, it’s not going to happen right when I—”

“Okay, but I’m saying, what am I supposed to be looking for, because it’s easier to see something if you know what you’re supposed to be—”

The first meteor shoots through the sky, a fireball against the glowing field of stars. David’s breath catches. They’re both quiet for a few seconds.

“Patrick,” David says quietly. “Did you arrange a comet for our date?”

Patrick laughs. Another meteor shoots past, in almost the same spot, brighter and whiter than the first.

“Meteor shower. And yes, I literally moved heaven and earth just for you.”

He means it as a joke, but it sounds way, way too mushy. David takes his hand, interlacing their fingers. Their linked hands rest on Patrick’s chest.

They watch for a while, the meteors intermittent, sometimes a small flash, sometimes a giant, flaming streak of light. They point each one out to each other, even though they’re both watching, and it feels goofy, but fun, right. He’s glad he chose to share this with David.

“So what’s going on with that wine? And that chocolate?” David asks, after a while. Patrick chuckles and slides back up to a sitting position.
“Here,” he says, handing David a glass as he squirms upright next to him. He picks up the wine bottle, and then looks around.

“Oh, shit,” he says.

There’s a pause. “Forgot the corkscrew,” David says.

“Forgot the corkscrew. I’m sorry, David, I messed this up. Ugh, I can’t believe I forgot that. Who packs wine and not a corkscrew?”

“I’m mostly impressed that you found wine in this town that isn’t from our store and that doesn’t have a screwtop,” David says, squinting at the label in the dark.

“Guess we’ll have to drink it later. Damn it.” So the date he planned is now just sitting on a blanket. He supposes they can eat the chocolate, but it was meant to go with the wine. He feels useless.

David, to his surprise, kisses him on the temple, then hops to his feet. “Give me your shoe,” he says.

“Um. What?”

David takes the bottle of wine from him, then holds out his other hand. “Shoe,” he says.

“Left or right?”

Patrick can’t quite see what David’s face is doing in the dark, but he thinks he’s laughing at him. “Let’s say left.”

Patrick gives him his left shoe, and David sets the wine bottle down inside it, filling the heel part. “Let’s see. Don’t want to damage the car. I’m not used to doing this with no vestige of civilization around.”

“Doing what?”

After a second, David walks over to the big beech tree that marks the edge of the field. Patrick can just barely make out David banging the heel of the shoe, and therefore the bottom of the wine bottle, against the smooth bark. It sounds really loud.

“You’re gonna break it,” he protests. He’d go over and stop David from doing it, but—David has his shoe.

“No, that’s what the shoe is for,” David yells back, out of breath. Patrick starts giggling.

“I’m not driving you to the hospital if you cut yourself.”

“So, what,” David says, between swings, “you’d just,” he takes another breath, swings again, “let me bleed out in a field?”

“If it helped you learn an important lesson, I would.”

David laughs, completely breathless now and giddy, and stops swinging for a second before starting again. Patrick can’t help the wide, delighted smile that’s all over his face, can’t help laughing with him.

“Almost there,” David says. “Couple more.” There are three more loud bangs of shoe hitting tree, and then he can see David standing up in the dark, assessing the bottle.
He comes and sits back down, handing Patrick his shoe back. “One of my very few practical skills,” he says, brandishing the wine. “See?”

Patrick looks; the cork is eighty percent out of the bottle. “Okay, that’s impressive,” he says. “Where’d you learn that?”


Patrick kisses him.

“Mostly my parents’ friends’ wine cellars,” David admits. “When I was a teenager, and forced to hang out with my parents’ friends’ teenaged children. Stealing stuff and drinking were the only interests we ever had in common. You don’t want to know the vintages that we opened that way.”

“Bet you got in trouble,” Patrick says, kissing him again. Moving on instinct, feeling daring, he picks up one of the chocolates and holds it to David’s lips; David’s mouth opens for him, and Patrick slips it onto his tongue. David’s lips close, just for a second, around Patrick’s fingers.

“Mmm,” David says, chewing slowly, savouring. “Sometimes.”

“You rebel.”

Patrick pulls the cork, and looks up again; the meteors are still shining down above them. He pours them each a glass.

“Cheers,” David says, and they clink glasses. Patrick puts his arm around David, and he snuggles down against him, like he had in the movie theatre, fitting his broad shoulders in against Patrick’s chest. It makes Patrick feel warm inside, thinking about all the ways they’re learning to fit their bodies together. He feeds David more chocolates, and David feeds him back; Patrick learns to open his mouth for David’s fingers, to make himself open for David. He learns the taste of David’s fingertips on his lips.

“So, do you know any of the constellations?” David asks, after a while.

“Not really,” Patrick says. “You?”

“None at all.”

“Well, actually,” Patrick says, “I do now know which one is Perseus, because that’s where the meteors show up.” He points, trying not to spill his wine in the process. “Guy with a sword.”

“Nope.”

Patrick chuckles and drops his hand, giving up. They drink more wine and watch more lights in the sky. When Patrick feeds David the last chocolate, David kisses his fingers, and Patrick feels a hot rush of energy zing down his nerve endings, fingers to spine to brain to the rest of his body.

“This is nice,” David says, holding up his wine glass, swirling it. “Where’d you get it?”

“Elk Lake,” Patrick admits. “There’s a surprisingly well stocked grocery store.”
“Ah, so not from town, then. I knew it.”

“You are definitely a savant when it comes to alcohol knowledge.” Patrick kisses his hairline, softly. David sort of squirms against him, getting more comfortable. Patrick likes it, likes being the soft surface for him to rest on. “Hey, don’t knock it, my alcohol knowledge is why you’re drinking it at all.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. That was impressive. And now I can’t stop thinking about you as a teenager, giggling away and banging Château Lafite against a wall in a wine cellar,” Patrick says, running his hand up and down David’s shoulder.

“Well, first of all, Lafite is drastically overrated.”

“Oh, of course it is.” Patrick’s never had any; he’s just heard about it on TV. He gets lost in that thought, for a moment, sucked down into it, that David can find boring these things Patrick has never even experienced in the first place.

“And I wouldn’t say giggling,” David is saying. “I was, though it might shock you to know this, a somewhat dour child.”

“Can’t imagine it.” Patrick can, and that thought helps him to relax a little, to shake off the pressing, recurring thought that David’s going to get bored of him quickly. David’s not dour around him.

David wriggles his arm free enough to poke him in the side. “What about you, what were you like as a teenager? What illicit alcohol did you lay your hands on?”

Patrick thinks back to that party under the train trestle, when he blacked out drinking from a forty of cheap rye and a jug of stolen moonshine; thinks back to the first time he and Rachel kissed, both of them having drunk way too much of her aunt’s leftover sangria; thinks back to every party with his hockey team or his baseball team or his lacrosse team, when it was okay to flop down against the other boys in untidy piles of limbs, after they’d had a lot of beer. He feels shy, not sure how to tell David any of that. He wants to be honest, but it’s hard to put all these feelings into words.

“I—the usual,” he ends up saying. “Stuff we stole from our parents. I played a lot of sports, so there were usually some kids from grade twelve or thirteen who were old enough to buy for the team.”

“Mmm, I’m picturing drunken hockey orgies,” David says. A meteor falls in the sky like punctuation.

“Not quite,” Patrick says. He thinks about telling David the story he told to a whole room of strangers, about that lacrosse game, about what it means to him now, in retrospect. But he’s sure that the moment he starts talking about his past, he’s going to tell David about Rachel, about how he treated her, about how stupid he was. He doesn’t want David to see that, not yet. He’s not that person anymore. He wants David to know this version of him, the new version. He wants to see who he can become, with David in his arms, and he’s not sure he can do that if he’s chained to his past.

He wonders what his life would’ve been like if he’d met David in high school. On the heels of that thought, he wonders if David was out in high school. Patrick had just assumed, but he doesn’t really know.

He doesn’t ask. He kisses the top of David’s head. It’s good, it’s fine, for both of them to start something new. To leave this stuff behind. He’s told David the things that matter, in the here and now. He’s never felt so honest with another person, before, as he feels lying next to David in the dark, being himself.
Three little meteors flash through the sky in quick succession.

“It’s really beautiful,” David says, into the silence. “I’m glad you brought me here.”

“Yeah? It’s a pretty cheap date.”

Twisting, David looks up at him, even though he can’t be seeing much in the dark. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Patrick shrugs with his free shoulder. “I guess I was worried this was a little too country for you. Or a little too—something. Simple.”

“It’s romantic,” David protests. “Despite all the dirt. And I’m not a, a snob.”

Patrick can’t help but laugh at that, letting his chest rumble under David’s ear, because David is absolutely and without any vestige of a doubt a huge snob.

“Okay, okay, you can stop laughing at me now, it’s not cute,” David grumbles. He sits up a little, bracing his hands on the blanket beneath them instead of resting his weight on Patrick. Patrick misses it immediately. “I’m not a snob about this, all right? I’ve never . . . done this before. The slow stuff. So actually it’s really easy for you to impress me.”

“All right,” Patrick agrees, and kisses him.

One kiss turns into another, and another, and before long they’re both stealing second, with David’s mouth moving down Patrick’s throat and Patrick’s hands up underneath David’s sweater. They make out like that for a while, heat growing between them, until Patrick’s making noises against David’s mouth and David’s hand is rubbing circles over Patrick’s side, but not going any lower. Patrick loves David’s mouth, his full lips, his smart tongue, the way he teases and draws back and makes Patrick follow him. Patrick does, every time, hungrily, chasing David down and kissing him again, again, again.

Eventually, Patrick slides back down onto his back, pulling David down on top of him.

“Yeah?” David asks, breathlessly, above him.

“Yeah,” Patrick says.

David relaxes into the position, his body covering Patrick’s, his leg slung over Patrick’s leg, his hands on either side of Patrick’s head, bracketing him in. It’s suddenly, incredibly intimate. Patrick wraps his arms around him and surges up against him, wildly, kissing, still kissing, and feeling his dick getting harder in his jeans.

David’s hips shift slightly, his thigh coming down between Patrick’s, and just like that he can feel David’s cock pressing against him, can feel himself hard up against David’s thigh. The feeling is incredible, makes him even more impossibly turned on. He feels hot, desperate.

“That all for me, gorgeous?” David asks, kissing below his ear. Sucking. It’s a voice Patrick hasn’t heard him use before, low and sultry; a sex voice.

“Y—yeah,” Patrick stutters, heat suffusing his face. “God. David.” They’ve never done this, body to body, all aligned, and the sensation of it, of David’s weight on top of him, of David’s heat, of David’s mouth and hands and chest and cock and legs all touching him at once is powerful and unreal, like a revelation, like a fireball streaking across the night sky.
“Tell me what you want,” David murmurs. Other than where they’re pressed together, he’s only touching Patrick above the waist. “I want you to get what you want.”

“I, I don’t know,” Patrick stutters out, and shifts his hips, a slow upward roll, a grind against David’s hips, his cock, his thighs. He’s so hard now, and he wants to thrust up, wants to lose himself against David’s body here in the dark, but he’s nervous, too, thoughts racing, and he still can’t answer David’s question. “I don’t—I.”

David’s hand, finally, moves lower, lands on his hip. He uses his grip to push Patrick down to the ground, stilling his motion. “Mkay. Take a second. Think about it.”

Patrick blinks his eyes open. He’s already thinking, that’s the problem, his thoughts crashing into one another at terrible speeds, anxieties about what to do and what’s going to happen and what David’s going to expect of him, all wrapped up inside the sensation of his body so hot for it, so desperate, so overwhelmed with want. His stomach twists. He should just do it; they should just do it, Patrick should push past this feeling, he should just get on with it.

His chest heaves with a deep, shuddery breath. David pulls back a little further, so he’s braced above Patrick, touching lightly, but not pressed hard against him. His hand rests warm on Patrick’s chest. Behind him, over his shoulder, streaks of white flame shoot through the sky.

It’s the right time for them to have sex, probably. Patrick didn’t plan on it, but he can do it. They can do it now. It’s romantic out here, and David wants him; they should do it now.

David presses a kiss to his chin. “Patrick?”

“Yeah,” Patrick breathes. “Yeah, kiss me.”

He does; they do; they kiss again, but David doesn’t press back down against him.

“Come here,” Patrick says, frustrated, turned on, hand in the small of David’s back to pull him closer.

“Okay,” David says, softly, and moves with him, moves closer, lips against Patrick’s jawline. “What else do you want?”

“Anything,” Patrick says, desperately, wishing that David would take the decision out of his hands, would just, just roll him over and fuck him here on the ground. Then it’d be over with, it’d be done, and he wouldn’t have to think about it anymore, wouldn’t have to feel so overwhelmed and apprehensive anymore. “Anything, David, anything.”

David pulls back again, and Patrick grits his teeth in frustration. He thinks of a joke to say, so he says it.

“I’ve never done this before. So it’s really easy for you to impress me.”

David huffs out a laugh. “Okay, that’s encouraging, but I think—maybe you should be more specific?” His hands soothe slowly over Patrick’s chest, over his shirt, just caressing, slowly. His mouth is slow and soft against Patrick’s neck, his throat, his jaw; Patrick realizes that his breath is coming really fast. He doesn’t want to be soothed. David’s gentle touch is just—frustrating. He doesn’t want it. He wants more of it, wants it harder, wants it hard enough to make him forget this feeling, this hesitation. The desires clash inside his head and he feels hot, powerless, out of control, like a rock hurtling and burning through the atmosphere of the Earth, like a star shooting helplessly to ground.
He’s so turned on, he’s so fucking hard, and David’s hard too, and so Patrick kisses him back, touches him back, but his hands are shaking and he gasps every time David’s mouth presses against his skin.

“Patrick,” David is saying, between kisses. “We can do whatever you want. Anything you want. Tell me.”

“Stop,” Patrick says, hears himself saying, “stop, sorry, I’m sorry, stop.” David does, pulling a few inches away, leaving his hand splayed on Patrick’s belly, not moving.

“Okay,” David says, softly, making space for Patrick to say more. Patrick closes his eyes shut tight against the glittering starfield above. God. He thought he was past this, this anxiety, this nervousness. He thought being with David would make it easy. He feels stupid.

“Sorry,” Patrick says, again. When he opens his eyes, David is frowning at him.

“You don’t have to be sorry. I asked you to say what you wanted.”

“Yeah, because getting a guy all turned on and then pushing him away over and over is a great way to keep him interested,” Patrick says, sarcastically. David’s eyes widen, the whites flashing in the dark, and he immediately wishes he could take it back, wishes he’d said literally anything else, wishes he’d remembered that David is getting good at knowing when Patrick is secretly sincere.

“Um. Okay,” David says, then pauses. His breath is still coming a little fast. He was into it, he was really into it, and Patrick stopped them. “I don’t know how else to tell you this? If it’s not obvious? But you have my interest. You have my attention. I can’t—you don’t know how much of my attention you have.”

When he speaks, Patrick’s voice is hoarse. “So, would you say, thirty percent, thirty-five . . . ?”

“I don’t know! I’m not the numbers guy,” David says, sounding legitimately aggrieved by the question, and Patrick laughs, suddenly, too loud, hysterical.

He hears a slap, and looks over; David’s grimacing and brushing his hand off in the grass. “Mosquitos,” he says, with distaste. He sprays more citronella stuff on his arms.

“Yeah,” Patrick says.

“Do you want to—watch the stars some more?” David asks. “Or we could make out some more. Or we could go back.”

“I think it’s pretty clear that I don’t know what I want, David,” Patrick snaps, and he wishes he didn’t sound so angry. David rubs his hand over Patrick’s belly, that soothing touch again, and this time Patrick takes a deep, shuddering breath and tries to relax into it. It’s embarrassing, for David to see him like this, like a kid who can’t handle a little heavy petting.

“Okay. Come here.” David lies back on the blanket, gesturing towards himself, and Patrick goes, slowly, pillowing his head on David’s chest. David’s arm wraps around him.

Maybe this is another way they can fit together. It feels dangerous, more dangerous than when David cuddled up against him in the mirror of this position. This way, he feels vulnerable. Like he’s asking David to comfort him. He shuts his eyes for a second, tries again to breathe through his difficulty with it, with that feeling of being held.

David’s fingertips come up to stroke lightly against Patrick’s temple, then down along his hairline,
then back up, ruffling the short hairs behind his ear, back and forth. Patrick opens his eyes again and lets himself feel comforted by the touch.

They watch the sky together, David’s fingertips in his hair, for long minutes. Patrick has to slap at a couple more mosquitos.

“I’m going to tell you something,” David says, when the silence has built up thick around them. Patrick moves as if to turn his head and look up at him, but David’s hand presses gently against his shoulder, encouraging him back down. “Just—just listen,” David says. Patrick looks up at the sky instead. He does know a couple of constellations other than Perseus. Orion. The Big Dipper. He follows the handle of the Big Dipper to find the North Star, and focuses on that.

“I’m listening,” he says.

David takes a deep breath. “I was—okay. Hmm.” His chest heaves under Patrick’s head, breath in and out. “I don’t want to have sex with you if you don’t want to have sex with me.”

Patrick opens his mouth to protest, because he does want it, that’s the whole problem, he wants it too much, and hasn’t he told David that? Hasn’t David felt how much Patrick wants him, how hard he was? But David cuts him off.

“Oh, or, you’re not ready, or whatever. The last thing I want,” he clears his throat, and Patrick realizes, in complete shock, that David’s choked up, that his throat sounds tight and constricted. “I need you to understand this, Patrick, the absolute last thing I want is for you to feel, to feel pressure. I don’t want that for you. You deserve—so much better than that. So much better. I want better than that for you.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, wondering what the story is behind that, who made David feel pressure. He squeezes David’s arm, angry at whoever it was. “Thank you.” His throat feels choked up, too. His mind races as he thinks about what David said, about what Patrick deserves. He can’t really see how it could be this, could be David Rose treating him so gently and sitting with him under a blanket of stars and waiting for him to get his shit together.

He feels like, at the very least, he owes David some explanation. He swallows hard and tries to find words to put to all these new feelings. “I’ve never really . . . made choices, before. About sex,” he says. He’s figuring it out as he says it, learning it for the first time as he articulates it for David. “It’s not like—I don’t mean to say anything terrible happened, it’s not like that, it’s just that I never had this before. Where I got to, to choose what I want. Where I had to think about what I want. It’s a lot to handle.”

David kisses his temple.

“That sounds kind of terrible,” he says, really quietly, as if he’s not sure he should say it at all. Patrick can’t think of anything to say back, so he squeezes David’s hand.

Another mosquito lands on Patrick’s arm; he slaps it.

“Ugh, I know, there’s so many of them now,” David says. “Ew.” He brushes at his face. Patrick waves at the air, where a few of them are circling, coming in for the kill.

“It’s the sweat,” Patrick says, dodging his face back from one that’s way too close to his eyes. “Once we started getting—um.” He trails off, but David laughs.

“You’re telling me these are like. Sex-sensing mosquitos,” he says, and waves at some of the circling ones so forcefully that the gestures look like karate chops. “Nature really is disgusting. Oh my God,
they’re not at all deterred by this spray anymore.”

“Nope,” Patrick agrees, slapping one that’s trying to bite him through his jeans. He sits up, and so does David, both of them waving away the oncoming swarm.

“I really liked this date,” David says, “but it might be over now.”

“Agreed,” Patrick says. David swoops in anyway, taking Patrick’s mouth, kissing him softly but with passion. Patrick melts into it.

A mosquito bites Patrick on the back of the neck, and he pulls back suddenly, slapping at it way too late, seeing his own blood smeared on his hand. “Ow! You little fucker.”


At least three mosquitos manage to get in the car with them, which makes for distraction on the ride home, at least. Patrick pulls into the motel parking lot with David still crowing about his successful kills.

“You’re a mighty hero,” Patrick agrees. “A legendary slayer of beasts.”

“And don’t you forget it,” David says, kissing him goodnight, leaving without asking for more.

*  

In the morning, before work, David texts him: I meant what I said last night, by the way

Patrick: About mosquitos?

David: About you having my attention. I like what we’re doing now. Take all the time you want.

Patrick thinks about why he chose to text, rather than waiting half an hour to see Patrick at the store. It’s like the moment when David made Patrick look up at the sky instead of looking at him: Patrick gets the feeling that he’s writing this over text, with that layer of distance, so he can let himself be more sincere. It’s hard for him, too, maybe, to talk about this stuff, to figure it out. That makes Patrick feel a little better about being so slow, so unsure, so messed up about it.

Patrick wants very badly to write a joke back to him, or to tease, to prod: to ask him what he’ll do if they never get there, or what if they’re in the retirement home together before anything gets heated, stuff like that. Those phrases all flick through his head. He lets them go.

Patrick: I know. Thank you for saying it. I don’t feel pressured.

He does, actually, but the pressure isn’t coming from David, so there’s not much David can do about it.

David: Want to make out later? If so wear a blue shirt and meet me in the stockroom when business gets slow in the afternoon

Patrick takes a breath, grateful to David for steering them away from the serious talk. He can only handle so much of it at a time.

Patrick: But how will I recognize you

Patrick: Okay wear a black and white sweater

Patrick: and when you hear the code word KNOCKOFF make a face
He thinks for a second, breathes for a second, then adds:

**Patrick:** and be really handsome

**David:** That’s not our code word. Ew

**Patrick:** What’s our code word then?

**David:** I’ll let you know

**David:** gorgeous

Patrick smiles, a smile that makes him feel warm all through his body, and gets ready for work. He wears a purple shirt, just to be ornery, but he does make out with David in the stockroom, when business gets slow in the afternoon.

* 

After that, Patrick decides some research is in order. He wants—he wants to have sex with David, he does, but he has no idea what he’s doing. When they were on that blanket under the stars he felt himself trembling, and losing control, just from being pressed together. It’s nothing he’s ever experienced before, and he doesn’t know how in the hell he’s going to get naked with David and, and have an orgasm with him when mostly-clothed heavy petting is making him feel this way. Like his body is doing something new, something he has no roadmap for.

He sets aside some time one evening when David’s having dinner with his family and Ray’s not home, and sits on his bed and opens his laptop. He’s good at research in general, and has some idea of search terms to use and search terms to avoid, but still the majority of the results he finds fall into two categories: heartfelt PG-rated advice for teenagers on coming out to their parents, and gay porn. He really wants the stuff in the middle, on having gay sex for the first time, on positions, on expectations, on—on relationships. He can be more ready for it, he thinks, if he knows what he should do in advance. He can get control over it.

He finally locates some articles giving good, practical advice; a lot of them emphasize that it’s okay for things to be messy or awkward, especially the first time, which is not exactly what he wants to hear. The articles are helpful, to some extent, at least with the mechanics and safety issues. But none of them really answer the questions he most wants to ask: how do I get less nervous? and how do I know he’s getting what he wants? and what the hell do I do with this feeling, like I’m going to explode when he touches me?

The articles all say things like communicate with your partner and take your time and don’t expect it to be perfect, which isn’t helpful at all.

Continued frustrated searching brings him to a bunch of Reddit posts and YouTube videos and the occasional Yahoo!Answers page, which, fine, why not; why not learn about something so intimate and personal on various internet hellsites? But he’s hungry for information, for stories, for real people to talk to about this, so he clicks, and he reads, even when it’s against his better judgement.

So much of the advice, even the most thoughtful, kind, inclusive advice, is aimed at teenagers, or even written by teenagers. When he tries “gay late in life” he gets a lot of heartfelt articles on coming out to your family when you’re over thirty and, no, he closes that tab, that’s not what he needs, that’s not relevant to his question right now.

He blinks, takes a breath, refocuses on the goal. He wants to have sex with David; he wants to not feel like an idiot while having sex with David; he wants to not feel so out of control every time he
gets David’s hands on him.

Giving up on teenaged vloggers’ dating advice, he tries the porn.

He’s never been a big fan of porn in general; he’s always distracted by the lack of logical coherence in the plots, or worried about someone walking in on the characters while they’re fucking on that deli counter, or wondering what’s actually going to be done about the leaky pipes. But he’s also never—he’s only ever looked at porn with women in it, so, who knows. He puts on one of the videos that came up when he made the mistake of searching the phrase “first time,” double-checks his headphone jack, and presses play.

It’s definitely hotter than the porn he’s seen before, because, oh yeah: he’s gay. His breathing picks up and his dick starts to get heavy in his sweatpants, watching the two men on screen suck each other’s cocks. He winces at the dialogue, which has a lot of talk about being a virgin and unsure and having a tight ass and needing a strong man to take him for his first ride—ew, as David would say—but he likes the sounds they make, kissing and sucking and moaning, so he doesn’t turn down the volume. The scene moves pretty quickly to anal sex, which, okay, so, just like that, then. The real-life advice sites and the article in *The Advocate* had emphasized that it wasn’t just like that, that it took more preparation and relaxation, and he definitely believes that over the porn, not least because the thirty-five year old who’s taking it up the ass on screen is definitely not a high school football star who’s just never done this before, sir.

But it’s still somewhat—useful, to see the ease with which they fuck, that putting a dick in your ass can be that easy, and that it can feel that good. Patrick didn’t know, either, that you could do it face to face; that’s good information. The thirty-five-year-old onscreen jacks himself off while he’s being fucked, and Patrick wonders what the etiquette of that is, whether you’re supposed to do yourself or if it’s more polite for the other guy to do it for you. He’s heard of *reacharound*, mostly in the context of corporate guys using it as a metaphor for payoffs and favours, but is that a real thing, or a word that people really use?

He wonders what David will expect.

He shifts back and forth on the bed, glancing up at the door to the room. Ray could be home anytime, and he has a habit of walking in without knocking. Patrick’s getting—he’s getting pretty hard, pretty fast, without even touching himself.

He keeps watching. He feels flushed. He really wants to touch himself.

The guy getting fucked throws his head back and starts making really hot noises, deep throaty moans. His eyes are closed. He looks—Patrick knows it’s acting, but he looks lost in it, as if he likes being lost in it, as if he likes being overwhelmed by the sensations his body is experiencing. Patrick licks his lips and strokes his hand over his cock, outside of his sweatpants.

Then the guy is coming, white streaks of come shooting an impressive distance up his body, striping his chest and neck. The guy fucking him is saying more stuff about how he’s a slutty little virgin—which, what?—and also a good boy to come with a dick inside him; Patrick tunes it out and watches as the camera focuses on the place where they’re joined, where a cock is sliding in and out of an ass.

He wonders if David likes doing that. He wonders if David likes having that done to him. Patrick has no idea whatsoever whether he’s ready to try either one, but it’s hot to watch, hot to think about, this sex act he’s never done, this kind of physical pleasure that he’s always associated with gay men, with being gay. He has . . . access, to this, now, he supposes, access to kinds of sex he hasn’t had before.
It occurs to him that he could buy a dildo. He knows he probably won’t.

The guy on top finally comes, saying more offputting but also kind of hot things about how good it feels to be fucking a tight virgin hole, and then—then there’s a moment when he presses his forehead to the other guy’s chest and his fingers dig into the other guy’s spread open thighs and God, God, Patrick is so fucking turned on by it. He slips his hand into his sweatpants, finally, takes himself in hand, but he can’t bear the idea of Ray coming home and walking in on him watching porn and jacking off.

He turns off the video and takes a shower instead. Under the heat of the water, he thinks about the two men fucking, so eagerly, so wantonly, and rubs his fingers over his asshole, his perineum, pushing up hard where it feels good, just behind his balls. His other hand speeds up on his cock, the images flashing behind his eyes, and Patrick gives in and pushes his wet fingers up inside himself, further than he’s gone before. It’s weird, at first, the stretch, but it feels good; it turns him on, and the fact that it turns him on turns him on even more. As he strokes himself he replays and replays that last moment from the porn, thinking about the way the guy’s eyes had closed so tightly, about the way his fingertips had dug into soft skin, about him pressing his forehead to another man’s chest and needing it, needing it so badly, getting it, taking it.

Patrick comes so hard he loses his balance, feet slipping on the slick ceramic, then almost falls and kills himself in the shower. “Fuck,” he says to himself, exhilarated, only a little bit because of the near-death experience.

It’s not how he wants to go, falling in the shower after a spectacular orgasm induced by nonspectacular porn. He’s got things to do. Among them, he wants one day to have a spectacular orgasm with David in the room.

For the first time, he wonders if he could be okay with David seeing him lose control like that.

*  

The next day, he texts Joon-ho: *I think I could use someone to talk to after all*, he writes, because all he wanted the day before was to talk to a real person with a real perspective, and, well, he doesn’t actually need the internet for that, with its confusing comment sections and unhelpful advice about communication. He’s an adult; he can ask another adult sex questions. He can do it.

**Joon-ho:** Sure thing, wanna get coffee today? Or I could do lunch. I’m in town.

Patrick chews his lip. He meant, over text; something one step beyond searching the wilds of the internet but not quite the thing where he’d have to make eye contact with a human being. It’s hard to imagine making eye contact with a human being and asking the questions he wants to ask, much less doing it at the café.

He settles on a compromise.

**Patrick:** Why don’t you meet me at Ray’s for lunch, I have leftover homemade soup and Ray made bread in the breadmaker.

Joon-ho texts back confirmation and a time, along with a little steaming-bowl emoji and a happy blushing face. Patrick smiles. He wonders if all linguists use this many emojis.

He asks David to cover the store over the lunch hour, which makes David narrow his eyes at him suspiciously.
“Why, where will you be?”

“Uh, I’ll be doing something that’s my business,” Patrick says, immediately. David’s eyebrows go up, and Patrick realizes that it came out defensive, not teasing like he meant it.

“Okay, fine,” David says, clearly meaning neither word. “I was only asking because lunchtime is usually busy on weekdays, and—”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean—I know that. I’ll bring you some lunch.”

David nods, mollified, and Patrick sighs.

“I’m having lunch with my friend Joon-ho.”

“Oh.”

“You should definitely not be jealous.”

“Who said anything about being jealous?” David’s tone is rising. “Just because you didn’t want to tell me who you were having lunch with and you have a friend who’s a, a cute, lil gay boy—”

“We’re talking about you,” Patrick interrupts, not willing to watch David’s anxiety spiral go any further downwards. “Joon-ho and me. That’s why I didn’t want to tell you, we’re talking about you.”

“Um,” David says, clearly not liking this any more than the idea that Patrick could be screwing around on him.

“I need . . . it’s really valuable to me to talk to other, other queer people. Because I don’t know what I’m doing, or feeling, half the time, and it’s—I need, um, outlets—”

“Oh,” David says, and comes out from behind the counter like he’s going to touch Patrick, but then just stands awkwardly two feet away from him, wincing and holding his left index finger tight in his right hand, as if to stop himself from gesturing. “That’s, that’s fine,” he says, eventually.

“Yeah,” Patrick says. He puts his hands in his pockets.

“So maybe you could pick me up a salad at the café before you go,” David says. Patrick nods, hard.

“You—you know you can also talk to me, right?” It’s said so softly that Patrick can’t bear to look at him. He nods again.

“I know that. Thank you, David.”

He goes back to putting the labels on the new colognes, and David finishes his vendor calls. When he goes out to the café to grab lunch for David, he gets him a milkshake in addition to the salad.

“Thanks, oh wow,” David says, accepting the milkshake. “That’s very nice.”

“You deserve it,” Patrick says, kissing him, hoping that he’s saying what he wants to say.

* 

Joon-ho arrives at the house well after Patrick does, so he’s already got the soup in a pot on the stove to warm it up and he’s sliced up some of the crusty, soft bread Ray made. He’s also had time to go over the list of questions he has in his head, and try to brainstorm ways to ask them without dying of
embarrassment.

“Hey, man,” Joon-ho says, and gives him a quick hug. Patrick returns it, perfunctory, mind already racing ahead to their conversation.

“Hey,” he replies.

“Smells good in here.” Joon-ho looks around, which gives Patrick an excuse to talk about normal things—the soup, the bread, what’s in them. He gets them both set up with food, and Joon-ho sits down at the kitchen table.

“Something to drink?” Patrick asks, still fiddling around with stuff on the counter, opening and closing the fridge.

“Water’s fine.”

“We have iced tea. And juice of some kind, I think. And—”

“Just water.” Joon-ho is looking at him with an amused, slightly bewildered expression. “I’ve never seen you this nervous before. Did you bring me here to ask me to do a crime with you or something?”

Patrick huffs a laugh and sits down. “No.”

“Too bad, I bet you’d be great at heists.”

This is an opinion that Patrick has always secretly had about himself, too, so he can’t help but smile.

“What part of the heist would you do?” Patrick looks down at his soup, stirs it with his spoon.

“The linguistics part, obviously,” Joon-ho says. “Every good heist movie has a linguist.”

“I hadn’t noticed that.”

“Usually it’s Brad Pitt or someone like that.”

“Right, I forgot about all the linguistics in those movies. All the analyzing of . . . language.”

Joon-ho smiles. “Patrick, do you know what linguistics is?”

“Not so much,” Patrick says. “What is it?”

“Well, it’s me having taken courses in pragmatics and knowing that your intention in asking that question is not actually to gain more knowledge about linguistics. Seriously, if it’s not crime, what is it?” Joon-ho takes a big bite of his soup. “This is amazing, by the way,” he says, with the half of his mouth that isn’t full.

“Thanks,” Patrick says. It’s his mom’s soup, that she used to make in the winters. Comfort food. He’d felt like making it a few days ago, so he texted her for the recipe. It always makes her happy, when he does that kind of thing, when they can talk about good memories from the past. Patrick likes it, too.

He can’t think of what to say next. He takes a bite of the bread. It’s soft and rich, with lots of seeds. Ray always makes breads with lots of seeds in them, because he thinks it’s healthy.

Patrick’s eyes widen, because that’s kind of worse, but he can’t think of anything to say to stop Joon-ho from going on.

“It’s not about me and Ray, because you texted me about Ray doing a photo session for a dog in very fond terms yesterday, so if you had some concern or knew he was cheating on me or something, you probably wouldn’t have done that.”

Patrick hadn’t even thought of that, that Joon-ho might worry about something like that. “No, no, it’s nothing like that. God, I’m sorry.”

Joon-ho waves his spoon in the air, pushing this away. “It’s fine. It wasn’t a serious concern. You don’t really know my other friends or family, so I have to assume it’s something about you. And since you’re a pretty together guy in all ways but one”—Patrick winces—“I have to assume it’s something about your relationship. And since you were okay discussing your relationships with me in the café before, I have to assume it’s not just about your relationship but about something more embarrassing.” Joon-ho blows on his next spoonful of soup, not losing eye contact with Patrick. “Like sex.” He sips the soup off the spoon.

Patrick realizes he’s gripping the table tightly with his left hand. His right hand is clenched around his spoon, which means he can’t move without splashing soup all over himself. “Um,” he says.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Joon-ho says. “I’m glad you felt, uh. Comfortable. Asking me.” His hesitation, clearly, is because nothing about Patrick’s body language right now is really communicating that he’s comfortable. He tries to relax his grip on the spoon, at least.

“Well, technically, I haven’t asked you anything yet,” Patrick says, forcing himself to take another bite.

“Okay. Let me ask you something, then.” Patrick kind of hates Joon-ho in this moment, hates how easily he can talk about this. Patrick has never talked about sex like this, not even straight sex, not even with the women he was having it with. How can Joon-ho be so casual? Where did he learn this? “Have you had sex with David? Is this a ‘he did this thing in bed and I need to know if it’s normal’ kind of Reddit situation or more of a ‘what the fuck am I gonna do in bed when we get there’ situation?” He watches Patrick for another beat, then speaks again. “Or is it a ‘I don’t think I actually like sex and don’t know how to tell him’ situation?”

“It’s, uh. It’s the second one,” Patrick says. “I want to. But we haven’t.”

“Check.” Joon-ho chews on a bite of bread, thoughtfully. David and Patrick have been on a lot of dates; it should be embarrassing, Patrick thinks, not to have had sex by now. Joon-ho doesn’t act like it is, though. “So, are your questions about . . . logistics, or safety, or—”


Joon-ho cocks his head. “We can still talk about it, if you like. The internet is not always your friend. And sometimes—I think sometimes guys don’t get what it’s like to feel pressure or coercion from another man in a sexual relationship, or how to handle it if it happens. It’s not something we’re brought up to be accustomed to.”

It reminds Patrick, suddenly, of what David said about pressure. He’d gotten the sense, though he hadn’t wanted to ask, that David was speaking from personal experience. That he’d been pressured. Patrick nods.

“That makes sense.” He frowns, wondering if Joon-ho might have personal experience there, too.
“Did you . . .?”

“No, but a—someone I know went through that. It’s hard for queer folks to talk about, I think.” He looks at Patrick again. “But that’s not the issue?”

“No. Nope. David’s—been really good. About that.”

Joon-ho nods at him slowly for a while, then smiles and says, “At some point you’re going to have to actually tell me what the problem is.”

“I know.” Patrick takes a breath. “So, it’s—I, we’ve, made out. A lot.”

Joon-ho grins. “Congratulations.”

Patrick narrows his eyes at him. “Thanks,” he says, dryly. “So, I just—every time we do that, I feel, really overwhelmed. Out of control, y’know? Like, my body is just . . .” he makes a vague gesture, not sure how to articulate it, but Joon-ho nods, so he continues. “And I thought it’d go away after I got more practice, that I’d calm down, but it’s not going away, it’s just getting . . . not worse, but. More. And I—and I want to have sex with him, but it’s. I don’t know how, when I feel this way.”

“So this is the thing where you feel like you’re dying whenever you’re with him. The not-a-heart-attack thing.” Joon-ho takes another bite of soup, casually, as if Patrick hadn’t just confessed to being at least a little bit broken about sex.


“And you feel it more and more, every time you make out.”

“Yeah.”

“And I’m guessing you never felt this way with—what was her name? Rhonda? Or the other girls you’ve dated.”

“Rachel,” Patrick says. “And no.” He eats more of his lunch, just for something to distract himself from this conversation.

“So like,” Joon-ho waves his spoon in a circle. “You’re gay.”

Patrick’s said those words to people, but it’s the first time he’s heard anyone else state his sexuality out loud like that. “Yeah,” he says.

Joon-ho looks at him like he’s missing something obvious. “You’re gay, and you’ve never felt like this before because you’ve never been in this situation before, being with someone you’re actually physically into. I mean, unless there really is a medical condition; I’m not a doctor. Yet.” He winks. Patrick rolls his eyes.

“This can’t just be how everyone feels about sex,” Patrick objects. “It can’t just be like—all this, this shaking, and trembling, and excitement—” he trails off, aware that he sounds ridiculous.

“Not all sex,” Joon-ho agrees, far too reasonably. “But with someone you’re really into, and when you’re doing everything for the first time, discovering a new sexuality, and when you’re . . . probably nervous? On top of that? Sure, it makes sense.”

It’s not the answer Patrick wanted, that this is normal, that he’s supposed to just let his body react this way. “How do I stop feeling so nervous about it, though,” he complains, looking down at his
soup, not even phrasing it like a question. Joon-ho pats his hand.

“Maybe just remind yourself that it’s okay to be out of control, sometimes?”

“Well that doesn’t sound like a real thing,” Patrick jokes, breathing out.

“For me, my first time, it was really about just . . . trying stuff out, experimenting with all the things I was nervous about, so that I didn’t have time to dwell on them and, you know. Build them up in my head. Dunno if that would work for you, though. Have you tried, uh, talking to David about this?”

His tone is very unsure, which makes sense, because it should be obvious by now that Patrick could barely bring himself to talk to anyone about this, much less David. He seesaws his hand. “Little bit. The internet said that I should communicate with my partner,” he says, miserably.

“Then sometimes the internet is your friend, after all,” Joon-ho says, surprised. “Wow, who knew.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to bring all this up with him?”

Joon-ho shrugs. “Hey David, I need to talk to you about all the sex we’re not having but want to have. I’m feeling overwhelmed. You got a minute? Hey David, let’s set some time aside to discuss when and where and how we’re gonna have sex together, so it’s not all up in the air and weird. Hey David, it’d really help me to know more about your sexual expectations because I am hella anxious about it.”

“I’m not hella anxious,” Patrick objects. Joon-ho looks down doubtfully at the place where Patrick’s left hand is still gripping the table way too tight.

“I mean, put it however it’d sound natural to you.”

Patrick tries to imagine it in his own voice, and can’t quite do it.

“You could also consider just articulating it to yourself first, so you feel more comfortable. You could write it down, or like . . . I’m guessing you’re not into journaling.”

“Can’t say I’ve tried it,” Patrick admits, sucking air through his teeth.

“Okay, so . . . okay, put it in a spreadsheet, or make a list, or something boring like that. Then you know what you want to try, what you want to experiment with.”

Patrick opens his mouth to object to this character assassination, then thinks about making a sex list and how calming that might be, and closes his mouth again.

“There you go,” Joon-ho laughs.

Patrick blows out a breath through his nose. “But how do I know in advance what he’s going to want?”

Shaking his head, Joon-ho speaks really slowly. “That,” he says, “Is the point. Of asking him.”

“Right,” Patrick says, grimacing. “Got it.”

“The thing is not that you have to be less nervous, or more, whatever, in control,” Joon-ho says. “That’s . . . unlikely to happen, I think. The thing is, you have to be able to trust him to be there for you when you’re nervous. Do you trust him?”

David has never been anything but gentle, considerate, kind—around the topic of sex, at least. It’s
something, really, how imperious and demanding he can be when it comes to decisions for the store, and how accommodating he’s been when it comes to sex. Patrick thinks about what that means, whether it means that David is very consciously, very carefully, making space for Patrick to have this experience. I want better than that for you, David had said, and he’d meant it.

“Yeah,” he says, slowly, realizing as he says it that it’s true. “I trust him.”

“So count on that. And tell him in advance what you want, and if he’s really trustworthy, it’ll be fine.”

“Okay,” Patrick says. “Okay, I can do that.” It’s much more approachable, put that way. He’s spent these last weeks with David building up trust, and it occurs to him that he wasn’t using it, wasn’t relying on it. “I guess I assumed I had to work this through . . . all on my own.”

“Yeah, you don’t,” Joon-ho agrees. “You have help! Someone else is in the room with you when you’re having sex! It’s not a solitary activity.”

Patrick croaks out a laugh. It’s always felt like a solitary activity to him before, alone in his own head with his anxiety. Making David a . . . collaborator . . . would be nice, maybe.

“That’s really healthy emotional advice, thank you, Joon-ho,” Patrick says. Joon-ho snorts.

“I—so, I’m sensing that maybe you were looking for more specific advice? Like. Sex tips?”

Patrick winces, because he had searched for gay sex tips online and the results had been horrifying as well as, sometimes, medically inadvisable. “I mean. If you had any.”

Joon-ho shakes his head. “Gay men aren’t all the same, we don’t all like the same things. But like . . .” he pauses, and Patrick gets the sense he’s looking for the right words. “I know it feels really different to you. I respect that. But it’s actually not all that different from what you’ve done before. Human bodies are kind of similar in a lot of ways. Just pay attention to what gets him hot, and make sure nothing’s too dry that should be wet, rub various parts of your body on various parts of his body, it’ll be fine.”

Patrick surprises himself with a laugh that burns off some of his nervousness, and he shakes his head. “Okay.” He eats a little more soup, sorting through the questions still left in his head. “I tried, for a while. Never really got to the sex part, though.” He shrugs. “I knew what was up, but I also knew it’d be a fight with my parents, and my church group, and at least half of my friends, so I tried anyway.”

Patrick nods. “I get that.”

“I know you do.” He smiles a little half smile.

“I was part of the youth ministry, back home.”

“Yeah? What church?”

“United,” Patrick says, and Joon-ho waves his hand at him.

“Psssh. You’ll be fine. Hippie.”
Patrick grins. “What was yours?”

“Presbyterian,” Joon-ho says, “so it’s real exciting that my mom’s church is still refusing to marry gays twelve years after it became legal.”

“But—you said they accepted you, when you came out.” Patrick’s drawn to the idea, that Joon-ho’s parents would go against their own church to accept their son.

“They did. They did. And my mom’s even stopped saying she’ll pray for me. And my dad once asked me if I’ve met any nice boys.”


“It is,” Joon-ho agrees.

He can’t imagine his dad ever saying anything like that, but it’s nice to imagine. His church was pretty liberal, in theory, but then there were never any actual gay people in the congregation in his town, so it was hard to know what people would do with him if he showed up. There had been the occasional pointed sermon about tolerance, where everyone would shake their head at all the homophobes out there violating God’s plan of love, but those sermons always made Patrick uncomfortable, for reasons he has trouble naming. Ostensibly, according to United Church policy, Pastor Sheila would marry him to a man if he asked. He also can’t imagine Pastor Sheila doing any such thing, can’t imagine himself standing at the front of the church where he was baptized and confirmed and sliding a ring onto a man’s finger, kissing a man to seal their marriage. No one in his town has ever done that.


“Yeah, and, I mean, they still want those nice boys to be rich Korean doctors who are my own age. So.”

Patrick frowns. “So, not Ray.”

“Not Ray.”

Something else occurs to Patrick. “Is Ray’s family Presbyterian, by any chance?” Ray’s never talked about religion in any way, that Patrick can recall.

“Ray’s family, in fact, is Muslim.”

“Ah.”

“Yeah.”

“So I’m guessing there’s a lot to talk about, if you want to introduce him to your family this time.”

“I might—wait a while. See how things go. If it gets more serious.”

That seems like a safe choice. Patrick nods. “I hope they’re good about it, if you decide to tell them,” he says.

“Yeah.” Joon-ho nods, looking down at his bowl.

They turn the conversation to lighter things: restaurants in Elmdale, who’s hosting the next shindig, Elmdale University Department of Linguistics drama, and they finish their food and wash up the dishes smiling and laughing together.
“Thanks for talking to me,” Patrick says, as they get ready to leave. “Even if you refused to tell me the secret gay sex tips.”

“Fine, in the future, you can just talk to your friend the internet, see how far you get,” Joon-ho grins, putting on his big aviator sunglasses. “’C’mere.”

He gives Patrick another hug, which Patrick tries to return, this time, with equal affection; then, when they pull apart, Joon-ho kisses him, softly, on his forehead.

“Gay blessing,” he says. “Part of my ministry.”

Patrick smiles. “Thanks, Joon-ho,” he says. They step outside, and Patrick locks the door behind them.

“Talk to him!” Joon-ho calls, waving as he heads towards his car. “You don’t have to figure it out on your own!”

“Okay!” Patrick calls back, with a lot more confidence than he feels.

* Heading back to the store that afternoon, he thinks about it, about trusting David, about talking to him about how he’s feeling, so he’s not in his own head so much. He thinks about experimenting with him, seeing what they like together.

Now that he’s broken the ice with Joon-ho, he thinks maybe he can manage the talking part, and the trusting part. The experimenting, part, though, is gonna be tougher.

Other than his car, and the Roses’ car, there really isn’t any private space for them to experiment in, and it’s already been . . . frustrating. Ever since second year of university, Patrick’s always had his own place, and sex in his relationships has always been something inevitable that was expected to happen after a certain amount of time, but it wasn’t something he needed to articulate to anyone or know about in advance. He planned for it, in the sense of buying condoms and trying to smell nice, but there was always the option, the lack of certainty: he could make out with a girl at his place or her place and then if she wanted sex, he’d do that. It wasn’t comfortable, but at least he didn’t have to think about it so much. He did the things you were supposed to do, in bed with a woman. He knew the script. He never had to make choices about it.

It occurs to him that that wasn’t maybe the healthiest thing, just going along with whatever the other person wanted, but gay realizations aside he doesn’t really love this option, either: if he wants to have sex with David, it’ll have to be obviously, intentionally, planned in advance, in the sense of finding a rare moment of privacy in Schitt’s Creek or else renting a hotel room in a different town—since he’s pretty sure David won’t want to rent a room at the only motel in this town—and driving there with the express purpose of having sex. It’d be a waste, financially speaking, to rent a hotel room and drive to it just to make out and see where the night takes them. Patrick can’t imagine that drive, the pressure, the tension in the car on the way there. What if they got there, and Patrick still wasn’t ready?

Maybe he should rent a room anyway. He doesn’t know.

He walks back in the store, still thinking about it. Ray’s schedule is unpredictable, and so is Ray: Patrick literally cannot predict what Ray might say to David, entirely out of good intentions, that might make things more awkward or put more pressure on them. And there’s really no way to avoid talking to Ray if Ray’s at home.
He could ask Ray to clear out for the night? But that seems—Patrick shies away from that thought, as well, and from the thought of the conversation he’d then have to have with Ray the next morning. That David might have to have with Ray the next morning. It’s like the hotel room: what if he makes special arrangements, and then can’t go through with it?

“How was lunch?” David asks. He’s got his colour wheel out, and there are a bunch of sketches and diagrams in front of him; he’s probably planning a new display, maybe for the locally-made maple syrups and candies that are arriving next week.


Patrick walks over to the counter and takes his hand. “That sounds like an awful burden that was placed on you,” he says.

“Mmm, it was pretty bad.”

Patrick leans over and kisses him. David looks slightly appeased.

“I was mostly talking about me, if it’s any consolation. You were tangential to the conversation.”

David looks down at his hand, at the place where Patrick is running his thumbs over David’s rings, distributed today in two sets of two on his index and ring fingers.

“What was the conversation about, then?” David asks, in a quiet voice.

Patrick plays with his rings some more, touching the undersides of David’s fingers where there are gaps, where the adjustable metal doesn’t quite encircle his fingers. A few seconds tick by, and then a few more. Patrick can feel the words in his chest, weighed down by concrete, struggling to find their way up and out of his mouth.

David waits for him. Then he says, “You don’t have to—”

Patrick interrupts. “It was about sex. I want—I want to have sex with you.” He takes a breath. “Very, very much.”

David’s hand twitches in his grip. Patrick brings himself to look up at David’s face.

“And?” David says.

“And, so, let’s do it. Let’s make a, a plan for it.”

“Okay,” David says, his voice husky. “So, first of all, it’s two in the afternoon, and we have three more hours of work to get through, and customers could walk in that door any second, and I’m just gonna predict that I’m going to have difficulty being present? For them? With that little announcement on my mind.”

Smiling, Patrick says, “Sorry.”

“You don’t look sorry,” David says, and Patrick feels his smile get bigger, feels his shoulders relax. It really is going to be better, with David collaborating on this project with him. He should’ve known; they’ve always complemented each other’s strengths.
“Second of all?” he prompts, wanting more of this, more of David feeling excited and off-balance, the way Patrick feels.

“Second of all, is there—did you—do we have a timeline for this event? Has a venue been selected? Because I am not braving those mosquitos again.”

Patrick’s smile breaks into a full-on laugh. “Um, actually, I was thinking about that too. Because Ray’s is—not a good choice, and your room—”

“Has my sister in it, yes. Remind me to tell you the story of the time my entire family walked in on me with a . . . with someone.”

“David,” Patrick says, slowly, delighted, “please tell me the story of the time your entire family walked in on you with someone.”

“Some other time,” David says, severely. “So, that leaves the back bench seat in my dad’s Lincoln, which, honestly, is less than ideal.”

Patrick’s car is even more cramped than the Lincoln. It’s not that Patrick’s never had sex in the backseat of a Toyota sedan, but it’s not like he has fond memories of it.

“I’d like to do better than that,” he agrees, and kisses David again. It’s more lingering this time, hotter, and Patrick considers the other, unspoken option, that they could fuck on the merchandise in the middle of the store.

The bell rings. Patrick pulls back, slowly, loving the way David’s eyes have darkened.

“We’ll talk about this more,” David promises.

Patrick nods, breathless. “Okay.”

* 

By the end of the day, they’re no closer to a solution. They end up making out in the back room for a while, though, and it feels hotter than before, more intentional, now that they’re on the edge of the next step. Patrick’s turned on and his hands are trembling, just thinking about it, but he thinks it’s better now, better with a plan in mind, better when he’s actually making choices.

“You’re sure?” David asks him, while Patrick is kissing the hollow between his collarbones, trying not to overthink it. Patrick focuses on this one spot, the softness of it, the way it sometimes makes David shiver to be kissed there. “About sex? We can wait.”

Patrick’s pressed up against him, can feel David’s cock hardening against his hip. He gives a little nudge with his thigh, rubbing up slowly, and David makes a low noise. “Feels like you don’t want to wait,” he says.

David gets a furrow between his eyebrows. “I told you, that doesn’t matter to me,” he says, annoyed. “You don’t have to, ever.”

Patrick chuckles, surprised. “Ever?”

“Yeah,” David says, seriously, ignoring the fact that Patrick’s joking. “Ever. I—it’s not. You get to choose.”

Patrick looks up at him. David looks determined. “I think I’m gonna choose to take you to bed,”
Patrick says, and David’s expression softens. “If we can ever find a bed. And if you want to.”

“I—I want to,” David says. He licks his lips, his eyes dropping down to Patrick’s mouth, then back up. “I definitely want to. But like. You should take your time, and not worry about my dick. Dicks are stupid.”

Patrick nudges him with his thigh again. “I think I’m gonna like your dick,” he murmurs, and then David kisses him, hard and desperate.

Eventually, though, they have to stop, because even if they moved the merchandise, the back room is wildly unsuited to having sex in, cramped and full of hard, sharp-edged surfaces. Patrick doesn’t know why he didn’t see that when he was putting up all these fucking shelves and maximizing the use of space.

“Text me if you have any privacy at home,” David says, breathless, when they finally give up.

“You too,” Patrick says, and kisses him just one more time before he leaves.

When Patrick gets home, though, Ray is puttering around the kitchen, making more bread.

“Patrick! I’m going to watch a movie and make some popcorn, are you interested?”

“No thanks,” Patrick says, sighing. He goes upstairs to his room and texts David.

Patrick: Ray’s in for the evening, unfortunately
Patrick: I don’t have a lock on my door and sound carries and I don’t think I could do it

David: Uh, agree
David: My sister is here, and so are my parents. The walls are way too thin to just ask Alexis to clear out
David: Plus the beds here are not ideal

Patrick’s seen the rooms, dropping David off and picking him up, and he doesn’t really want to do any experimenting in a squeaky twin bed with David’s parents ten feet away.

Patrick: This might take more long term planning

David: You love long term planning

Patrick smiles down at his phone.

Patrick: Yeah nothing turns me on quite like overcoming logistical hurdles, rowr

David: I knew it
David: Seriously, it’ll happen when it happens

Patrick: I really want it to happen soon, though

He thinks about typing more, about saying how he feels nervous, how he feels powerless and out of control when they touch, how he doesn’t know how he’s going to respond or what his body’s going to do and that’s scary and exciting at the same time, how he’s never wanted anyone like this before and it’s been hard to get used to. He can tell David this, he thinks. While he’s thinking about how to put it, David texts him again.
David: Me too. I think about you all the time

This knocks Patrick’s train of thought right off the tracks.

Patrick: Do you

David: Of course I do.

He licks his lips. He wants to know more, wants to know everything, wants to be able to picture it, David—thinking about him, jerking off, eyes slipping closed, thinking about him, hand on his dick, thinking—well.

Patrick: What do you think about

There’s a long pause before David texts again. Patrick wonders if this is okay, if David likes this. They’ve always been kind of . . . vocal, together, all that teasing and banter, and Patrick’s wondering now if that’s going to translate into sex, too. He’s never really liked dirty talk, but only because he could never think of anything to say; with David, he might have more inspiration.

David: Your mouth. How I feel when you kiss me. Your hands all over me.

It’s pretty tame, limited to the stuff they’ve already done; Patrick gets the feeling he’s holding back, trying not to overwhelm him. He bites his lip, frustrated.

Patrick: Where do you want me to put my hands? Be specific.

David: Oh, specific
David: I see
David: Well, specifically, you could finger me open

A thrill races through Patrick’s body. They’re doing this. David’s doing this, to him.

Patrick: Yeah
Patrick: Tell me more

David: put your slick fingers inside me and work me open
David: you’ve got small hands and they look strong I bet you could get a lot of those strong little fingers inside me

Patrick: I’d like to

David: I bet you’d fuck me really good with them

Patrick closes his eyes, body on fire, cock hard in his pants. He doesn’t know what to say back, just wants David to keep going. He thinks about what he’s seen in porn, what he’s read about. He takes a deep breath, and then he takes a risk.

Patrick: I would do that
Patrick: I could put my whole fist inside you
Patrick: If you like that

David: fuck
David: I like that
David: are you touching yourself

Patrick thinks about Ray downstairs, about how hard it’s been to be quiet, before, about what noises he might make if he’s jerking off while David’s actually . . . actually on the phone with him. Talking to him.

Patrick: I want to
Patrick: don’t wanna make noise, tho
Patrick: are you?

David: same
David: can’t with Alexis here
David: you should take a shower

Patrick: I’m thinking of a shower
Patrick: ha

Swallowing hard, he thinks about what he wants to say next. He can picture it, and it’s so hot, and he wants to say it. David said those things about, about opening him up with his fingers. Patrick can say this.

Patrick: Would you take a shower with me?
Patrick: I mean, not literally, but
Patrick: at the same time
Patrick: I could think about you
Patrick: you could think about me

David: Yeah
David: Can we time it

Patrick laughs, helpless.

Patrick: It’s 7:48. Plan to step under the water at exactly 7:55

He wants to write, get your hand on your dick. fuck your fist. close your eyes and think of me sucking you off.

Patrick: think of me

David: oh, I promise I am going to think of you
David: and your hands
David: what will you think of

Patrick: you

He takes a deep breath, and types more.

Patrick: your beautiful mouth

David: yes
David: fuck that’s so hot

Patrick: It’s 7:52 now. Better get going
He gets going himself, pressing the heel of his hand to his cock and closing his eyes for a second before standing up. Fuck, he’s so hard, just thinking about this. His phone beeps again as he walks down the hall to the bathroom.

David: I like you telling me what to do

Jesus.

He closes the bathroom door behind him and unzips his pants, hissing in relief.

Patrick: 7:53. Get in with me

David: I’m running the water

Patrick does, too, letting it get warm while he strips down as fast as he can. He glances back at his phone: 7:54. He wants to—God. It can’t be too forward, can it? Not when they’re already doing this together. He texts fast, blushing, and sends before he can stop himself.

Patrick: text me after you come

He puts the phone down on the counter and gets under the spray, groaning at the feeling of the hot water over his body, grateful that the sound of the pipes should cover any noises. He doesn’t bother with anything fancy, just wraps one hand around his dick and braces the other hand on the tile wall and jacks himself as fast and as hard as he can, and thinks about David doing the same, fucking his fist at the same time, across town.

Thoughts flit through his mind, the stuff they were just talking about, fingering and fisting, but when Patrick imagines it, he imagines David doing it to him, David opening him up with his fingers, David’s fist inside him, stretching him wide. David doesn’t have small hands. David would split him open. David’s knuckles rubbing Patrick from the inside, David’s forearm twisting slowly, the muscles on it cording. Patrick imagines it, how it’d feel to be taken like that, to take so much of David inside him.

He comes hard, dizzingly hard, catching himself with his arm when his knees start to buckle, and he thinks he makes some very undignified noises as he does it. He blinks his eyes open, after, watching his come drip down the tile for a second before using some water to wash it away.

He takes his time getting clean. He wants there to be a text from David waiting for him when he gets out.

When he finally does get out of the shower, the room is pretty swampy and his phone screen is fogged up, so he dries off, wraps a towel around his waist and goes back to his room before he looks.

David: This is me texting you after

Patrick: Me too

David: That took a while

Patrick: Trust me, it didn’t

Patrick drops the towel on the floor and finds his pajama pants, just in case Ray comes up to talk, then he flops down on the bed, bare chested.
David: Wow
David: Well that makes me feel nice

Patrick blushes, which is really dumb, but he can’t help it. He likes it. David feeling nice.

Patrick: You make me feel very nice
David: It’ll be nicer when I can get you in a bed
David: I promise

Patrick tries to imagine it, the two of them in bed together, saying those same things, touching in the way they talked about, Patrick opening David up with his fingers or his fist, David doing the same to him. He scrubs his hands over his face. He wants it, he wants it so badly. He wants so much, so many different things.

Patrick: I have no doubt
Patrick: Talk tomorrow?

David: Yeah. Goodnight, Patrick.

David Goodnight, David.

Patrick lies on his bed for a while, thinking about what they just did, replaying it in his mind. It was so hot. He just hopes he can replicate that feeling in person. His mind worries over the idea, for a while, of what they’re gonna do together, of how it’s gonna happen, of what he wants. The anxious thoughts start to swarm through him.

They’re interrupted by another text.

Joon-ho: So, did you talk to him???

Well, he and David had definitely talked.

Patrick: Yes

Joon-ho: About . . . ?

Patrick laughs. He’s not going to write about putting my fist in his ass.

Patrick: About having sex, and when, and where. We’re gonna figure out a place.

Joon-ho: That’s a good start!

Patrick furrows his brow, staring down at the screen. He types and then deletes a few different texts before settling on the one he sends.

Patrick: Start to what?

Joon-ho: I mean . . . all the other stuff we talked about? Emotions? Expectations? Anxiety?

Fingers frozen against the phone keyboard, Patrick thinks back on what he and David talked about today. He’d been so excited about the parts of the conversation they did have that he kind of . . . forgot the rest of it. The hard parts.
Patrick: Oh yeah, that

Joon-ho: Yeah, that

Patrick: I was hoping I’d get by without any of that

There’s a long pause before Joon-ho texts back.

Joon-ho: I mean, you do you, but.

Patrick: Point taken.

Joon-ho: You wanna talk about it?

Patrick really, really doesn’t. He talked so much today. He feels talked out. It’s the same set of thoughts and fears and worries over and over, and he’s tired.

Patrick: No. Thanks, though. I think I’ll save my talking for David tomorrow.

Joon-ho sends back a bunch of praying-hands and rainbow emojis. Patrick smiles, and then sends a smiley face, and a rainbow of his own.

After that, he finds he can’t concentrate on his book about small business viral marketing strategies, and he knows he’s not going to be able to sleep yet. He doesn’t know how to articulate everything he’s feeling to David, when he can barely handle the thoughts in his own mind.

Eventually, out of ideas, he picks up a pen and paper, and tries doing the thing that Joon-ho joked about.

SEX LIST, he writes, at the top, grinning to himself, because he might as well go all in.

It’s hard to do, at first, to write those words on paper, to make them real. But the more he writes, the better he feels, and the more he thinks he can talk to David the next day.

He writes down what he wants, and why, and what he wants to do for David, and what he’s been fantasizing about, and what makes him nervous. Before too long it’s multiple pages, full of sex acts and emotions all twisted up together, articulating things he hadn’t even acknowledged before. When he finally feels finished, the pages are messy, full of scribbles and arrows and exclamation marks, but the inside of his head feels neat and tidy by comparison, cleared out, ready for something new.

He makes a second, clean copy of the list, this time neatly written and . . . categorized. With headings and subheadings. The categories kind of make him blush more than the individual items, but he commits them to paper anyway, thinking through what he wants, and what he wants to ask David about, and what he imagines David might want.

It’s easier, he finds, to go to sleep, with all those thoughts organized and ready, waiting for him on the bedside table.

* 

As he’s getting dressed the next morning, Patrick looks over at the sex list on his bedside table, all the thoughts he had that he hasn’t told David about yet. Frowning, he picks it up, and looks it over. Then he folds it neatly and tucks into his back pocket. He can’t quite imagine showing it to David, but having it there with him, to look at for reference or just . . . just for strength, might help. He’s going to have this conversation today, he tells himself, buttoning up his shirt. No more putting it off.
When he gets to work, though, David’s discombobulated, focused on Alexis apparently being pregnant, and they end up talking about that rather than talking about their sexting, or any of the other stuff, the emotions. Patrick finds that he likes being the one to take David by the shoulders, to tell him that things are going to be all right. David breathes out, forehead pressed to Patrick’s neck, and then demands that Patrick apply some under-eye ointment for him.

“Okay,” Patrick says. He likes David leaning on him. He likes that idea, too, of being useful, of taking care of David, the way David has been taking care of him. He eyeballs their height difference, calculates his likelihood of poking David in the eye with a fingernail, then takes David’s biceps in his hands and walks him backwards. David stumbles at first, then goes with it.

“Oh,” he says, as they move together.

“Up on the table,” Patrick says, liking the way David’s body is listening to his, like they’re dancing. David doesn’t break eye contact as he hops up, and Patrick has to kiss him.

David tilts his face towards Patrick and looks up, giving Patrick access to touch him, and in that moment, Patrick realizes that David trusts him, will move with him where he wants to go, will put himself in Patrick’s hands. Patrick loves it, and kisses him the whole time he’s applying the under-eye stuff, the pad of his thumb lightly touching the delicate skin. He doesn’t want to stop.

They trust each other. It’s obvious, suddenly. It makes him feel tender and confident all at once.

Patrick keeps kissing him until a customer comes in and interrupts.

“Between Alexis being knocked up, and you and me not having the privacy to . . . really connect? I’m feeling very shaken,” David says.

Patrick wants to laugh, because this is David asking Patrick to comfort him, to coddle him. He loves it. He loves it so much. “Do you think you’re gonna make it, though?” he asks, teasing, hands on David’s thighs. David’s little answering smile says that he knows Patrick is teasing him, that he likes the teasing, that the teasing is doing the work of making him feel better.

“Unclear,” he says, shaking his head, obviously unable to keep a straight face, like he knows he’s ridiculous and is asking to be spoiled anyway. “Unclear on whether I’m gonna make it through or not.”

“Stay strong,” Patrick says, and goes off to help the customer.

After that, David seems less freaked out about Alexis, and Patrick feels ridiculously good about it, about every small smile that crosses David’s face, because he was the one who was able to put that smile there, the one who was able to make David Rose relax. Maybe he can let David do the same for him.

*

Later that day, he’s in the back room sorting through inventory, figuring out what they’ll need to reorder soon, when David comes in to join him.

“No customers?”

“Not a one. It’s usually quiet around this time on a Friday, though. Everyone’s done running errands and is getting ready to make dinner or go out, but no one’s gone out quite yet. We’ll get more business in about two hours, when people stop in on their way to or from the café.”
Patrick thinks through this, figuring that David is probably right. He’s had this kind of instinct since they opened, of being able to notice and explain the patterns in their clientele. It’s not something Patrick’s particularly good at, but David’s usually right when he makes a prediction like that.

“So, you’re looking for something to do?” he asks, cocking his head.

“Nope.” He leans back against the shelves Patrick’s working on, putting himself into Patrick’s space. Patrick smiles, helplessly, delighted. He loves when David makes it easy like this.

“Are you sure? Because I did the soaps, but there’s a bunch more inventory over there to go through, and—”

“I went through it earlier,” David says, softly, trailing his fingers up Patrick’s arm. “When you were restocking out front.”

“There are still vendor calls to make, then,” Patrick murmurs, his lips almost against David’s.

“It’s on my schedule for tomorrow,” David breathes, and then kisses him. It’s good; God, it’s always so good with him, so hot, so warm, and Patrick just wants to sink into David, to make out with him here until the bell over the door interrupts them, like they’ve done so many times before.

He’s got a plan, though. He’s got a list. He’s got a mission.

“So,” Patrick says, between kisses, his hands running up and down over David’s hips, “I’ve been thinking that we should try . . . talking. Again. Like we did yesterday. About what we want to do together.”

David looks down at him, and God, God, he’s so beautiful. Patrick can’t believe how beautiful he is, with his kiss-red lips and his dark stubble and his eyes heavy-lidded with desire.

“You want me to . . . talk. Now? Here?” David asks. He sounds surprised. His breath is coming quickly.

“Why not now?” Patrick runs his hands nervously up David’s arms, to his shoulders. David bites his lip and looks past Patrick to the mostly-closed curtain that separates them from the main part of the store.

“We could be, um, interrupted,” but David’s voice is low and husky, and Patrick knows it’s not a real objection.

“Then we’ll come back to it later,” Patrick says. David’s eyebrows shoot up, but then he licks his lips and nods.

“Okay. Okay.”

Patrick thinks through all the things on his list, all the ideas and feelings he poured onto the paper. He could tell David about one of them, he thinks, to get them started, could talk about something that he wants, or doesn’t want, or is worried about. Mentally, he flips through all the items, unable to settle on one of them. Turns out it’s still easier to write stuff down than to say it to David.

“So, do you, uh. You want me to start?” David asks. Patrick nods, relieved.

“Thank you.”

“Okay,” David says again. He swallows. Patrick feels a little nervous, but he’s surprised that David
does, too; surely talking about sex isn’t that new to him.

“Or I could—”

“No, no.” David takes Patrick’s face in his hands and kisses him. “I can do this. Um.” He pauses, then puts his hands on Patrick’s shoulders, running his palms along the seam of his shirt. Patrick braces for a list of hard limits, or preferences, things he does and doesn’t do in bed; or maybe a discussion about topping versus bottoming; or maybe just a heartfelt explanation of how the only important thing is that he and Patrick listen to each other in the moment.

When he speaks, David’s voice is low. “I’d start by taking you out of this. I’ve never even seen you with your shirt all the way off, and that’s a crime. I’d run my hands over your shoulders, down your chest. I’d play with your nipples, get you hard and aching.”

David’s hands do nothing of the kind, still resting on his shoulders, but Patrick feels his entire body flush with some powerful combination of embarrassment and arousal.

“I—yeah?” Patrick gets the sense that David’s not on the same page with him again, but he can’t quite bring himself to tell David to stop. He wants to hear more about this fantasy.

“Yeah. And I’d strip off your belt. I’d open your jeans, and take out your cock. I want to suck you so bad, Patrick. I want—I want to feel you all hot and hard inside me.”

Jesus. David’s hands are running lightly over Patrick’s arms, shoulder to elbow, up and down, and it’s the most innocent of touches but Patrick’s getting hard in his jeans just thinking about it.

He wants David to keep going. This wasn’t the plan, though.

“David,” he says, squeezing his eyes shut for a second.

“Yeah.” David leans in and kisses his neck. It feels amazing.

“That’s, that’s so hot,” Patrick stutters. “But I meant. Talk about, um, boundaries. Expectations.”

David’s mouth stills on his neck and Patrick really hates himself for saying anything. “So you weren’t. Uh. You weren’t asking me to talk you off in the stockroom, then.”

“I was—no, I was not.”

David pulls back, obviously mortified, and Patrick grabs him up before he can go anywhere.

“But now I kind of want you to talk me off in the stockroom?” he says, breath coming fast, and kisses David hard. David kisses back, desperate, his skin hot and flushed.

“Fuck,” David is saying, pulling away from his mouth. “Fuck, fuck, I can’t believe I—fuck. I’m sorry.” He’s flushed, and he won’t meet Patrick’s eyes, and Patrick wants him even more for it, wants him even more for the way he’s embarrassed, unsure. Careful. That deep, rock-solid feeling of trust expands inside him.

“No, no, I want—I wanted—” Patrick pauses, not sure how to articulate what he wanted. He closes his eyes and clenches his jaw, the weeks of frustration built up in him. He just wants David to know, wants David to understand how he’s feeling.

Without words, he uses his body instead, pinning David against the shelves and pushing himself up against him, letting David feel how hot he is, how he’s already getting hard in his jeans just from
hearing him talk.

“You do this to me,” Patrick says, breathlessly, thinking of every makeout session in his car, of their night under the stars, of every time David kissed him until he got hard and overwhelmed and out of control. He’s honest, brutally honest: “This is what you do to me. Every time. You get me so turned on. You make me feel like I’m losing my fucking mind, David. That’s why I wanted to talk. To prepare. To calm myself down. Because otherwise I feel like I’m, I’m going to explode.”

“God, Patrick,” David says, softly, his hand on Patrick’s face.

“I’m not used to wanting anything this much,” Patrick continues, words pouring out of him now. “I never wanted anyone the way I want you. And it makes me . . . nervous, and excited, and overwhelmed.”


“That’s . . . gonna make it worse,” Patrick says. “I want you more every day. This is killing me. Not having you. Not knowing.”

David closes his eyes, like he’s in pain. “How do you just say things like that,” he says, on an exhalation of breath. He opens his eyes again, pursing his lips. “Tell me what you want, Patrick. I want to make it easy for you.” He kisses him again.

“I want to touch you so much. All the time,” Patrick says, pushing up David’s sweater and getting his hands on his sides, on the soft skin of his lower back. “I want to feel you. Put my hand on you and feel you get hard for me.” It’s one of the things on the list in Patrick’s back pocket.

David’s mouth is on his neck again, and David’s thumbs are on his hipbones, David’s strong hands wrapped around his hips and holding him tight and fuck, it’s so good, Patrick wants David to do what he said, open his jeans and suck him, wants to know what David looks like with his mouth wrapped around Patrick’s dick, wants to feel these hands pinning his hips to a bed, feel David taking him ruthlessly, making him come.

It still feels overwhelming. Patrick’s starting to like it.

“I love your hands. I told you. I want them on me. In me.” David murmurs. His hands pull at Patrick’s shirt until it’s up and out of his jeans. “Tell me what else.”

“You said—you said you wanted to suck me,” Patrick manages. “I want that. I want to feel your mouth on me.”

“Okay. So, let’s do that first,” David says, his hands rubbing up and down Patrick’s sides, and for a second Patrick thinks he means, right here, right now. “When we get there. I’m gonna suck you first, okay? Make you come in my mouth. Make you, um.” He quirks a smile, looking pleased with himself. “Explode.”

Patrick breathes a laugh. “Okay,” he says, kissing him. “Okay.” It settles into his mind, that image, that expectation: this is what’s going to happen. David’s made a plan for them. He takes a deep breath.

“Then what?” David asks. “What’s the next part of the plan?” He’s so hot, pressed up against Patrick, his whole body hot and pressed tight against him. Patrick’s getting really hard, God.

“I, I have a list,” Patrick says. David’s laugh comes soft against his neck.
“Of course you do,” he says. “What’s item number one?”

“It’s categorized, not itemized,” Patrick says, and David laughs again, and then he’s sucking on Patrick’s neck, and Patrick gasps, words falling from his mouth. “I wanna suck you. I wanna bite your thighs. I want you to finger me. I want you to make me lose control.”


“Yeah. I—want that. I think about that.”

“It’s on the list,” David says. His hands slide down to Patrick’s lower back, fingers just slipping into the top of his jeans. Patrick shudders.

“Yeah.”

“What else? You want my tongue in your ass, too? Have you thought about that?”

“I don’t—I don’t know,” Patrick admits. That’s on the list under the Really Hot to Think About But What the Heck category. “Is that good?”

“Yeah,” David says. “It’s good. I’ll make it good. I’ll make it so good for you.”

“God. Yeah,” Patrick says, “yeah, okay, yeah.” He mentally recategorizes that one, because David wants it, David wants to make it good for him, and that’s so hot in itself.

He should really digitize the list; he has a feeling he’ll need to make frequent updates.

Patrick can’t stop running his hands over David’s back, scratching lightly, rubbing at the muscles. David arches into his touch. They kiss again, deep and desperate, time slowing all around them, and Patrick realizes that if he lets this go on much longer he’s going to ask David to do that to him now, for real, behind a flimsy half-closed curtain while their store is open to customers.

It’s like when David kissed him for the first time: the floodgates opening, making him reckless, turning him on like an electric surge. He finally feels ready for it, like his brain has finally caught up to what his body’s been telling him. He wants to lose control with David. He wants David to make him feel that.

“We can’t, we can’t do this here,” he manages to say, his hands still under David’s shirt, gripping hard at the soft skin of his back, his head still tipped back for David’s mouth on his neck, his hips still pressed up against David’s. He wants to grind against him. “We can’t,” he says, again.

“Yeah,” David says, dropping his forehead to Patrick’s shoulder. Patrick breathes out shakily, cups the back of his neck, kisses his temple. “Yeah, I know. I know.”

“I’m honestly not sure we can even talk about doing this here, if this is the kind of talking that you’re going to be doing.”

David’s breath huffs against Patrick’s shirt. “Ungh. Just kill me, just let me die, it would be better than living with this shame.”

“Shhh,” Patrick laughs, taking his hands out from under David’s shirt, cupping his face, pulling him back up. “Shhh, I don’t want you to die. Especially not before I get in your pants.”

“Get in my pants?” David asks. Patrick kisses him to shut him up.

“Yeah,” he says. “Though, I admit that sometimes with your pants I’m not sure what the proper entry
point might be.”

“Mm, I can show you.”

David kisses him back, and then they’re kissing again, and Patrick knows he can’t take it too far, but he slides his hands back up under David’s sweater, just a little, just for a little longer. A little more of this, he tells himself, and then they’ll stop.

The bell over the door rings.

“Fuck,” David whispers. His gaze rakes over Patrick, taking in his untucked shirt and what must be a flush on his cheeks, and . . . whatever else, and clears his throat. “Okay. Okay. I’ll get it. You—get yourself together.”

“If you’d just stop taking me apart,” Patrick grumbles, and David stops to kiss him again, swift and soft, smiling, before he heads out to the front, tugging down his sweater where Patrick pushed it up.

It turns out it’s Stevie, and after taking in the state of them—they were apparently not subtle—she wants to loan them her apartment. Patrick would be embarrassed, or, really, he is embarrassed, but despite what David’s saying he does feel desperate. He doesn’t want to wait anymore, can’t wait anymore, to get his hands on David’s body without any interruptions or limitations, and see what happens.

After Stevie leaves, he looks at his hickey in the mirror, still visible above the collar of his now-completely-buttoned shirt.

“You like it,” David says.

“I would not say that,” Patrick responds, emphatically.

“I’m gonna give you more of those tonight.” David wraps his arms around Patrick from behind, kissing the hickey lightly. “That’s another part of the plan.”

“Okay,” Patrick says. He can see, in the mirror, that he’s smiling like a doof. He kind of doesn’t care. “Below the collar, please.”

“Is that a boundary?”

“Yes,” Patrick replies.

*

Stevie’s apartment, it turns out, doesn’t come without a catch, and the catch is that Patrick is confronted with the image of David having sex with a six-foot-three underwear model and also Stevie at the same time, which he deeply does not appreciate after he’s taken so long just to get past second base with him. It makes him feel nervous again, and inadequate, so he makes David explain the whole David-Jake-Stevie thing twice, to give himself time to think it through and calm down.

“So, who is feeling sexy?” David asks, doing a ridiculous little shimmy. It’s funny, a little ironic, David’s way of trying to defuse the tension. Patrick feels his confidence tick up again.

“Getting there for sure,” Patrick says, turning his face away, finding their rhythm again by teasing him. David blows out a frustrated breath against his shoulder, and Patrick feels like he’s back on solid ground. It’s occurring to him that not talking about their histories has led them here, to him not knowing that David had almost . . . all. With his best friend and a guy so handsome it’s offensive. “I
just, you know, I knew you had a rich dating history, David, I just didn’t expect to be graced with the presence of two of your exes tonight.”

He can’t help but think, though, of David saying *You have my attention.* He’s unused to this emotion, to this warm combination of jealousy and affection, like Jake’s presence only makes it more clear how much David wants him.

“Yeah, funny thing,” David says, and he’s smiling, like he knows Patrick’s not as bothered by it as he’s pretending to be. “Neither did I. So.”

“But. Given that we only have the apartment for one night. Maybe it’s best if we lock that box back up for now?”

David agrees, eyes dancing, and laughs against his mouth when Patrick brushes off the question of his own dating history.

There’ll be time for that, Patrick thinks, as he takes David’s jaw in his hand and kisses him deeply. He and David can talk about their pasts, maybe, sometime soon. For now, there’s this, David smiling and playful in his arms, the same guy who’s been here with him all through this. He knows David, and David knows him, Patrick’s sure of that; they don’t need to have a conversation about their pasts for that to be true. For them to be honest with each other.

“You wanna finish that?” David asks, when they pull apart, darting his eyes to Patrick’s whiskey. “Because I’ve got some setup to do.”

“Some setup to do,” Patrick repeats. He glances over at David’s overnight bag, sitting by the door of the bedroom. “You’re going to . . . put down a tarp? Or wait, a slip-n-slide?”

David kisses him again and stands. Patrick takes another sip of his whiskey and watches him go. “I thought you’d be more into the bouncy castle,” David says, low and husky.

Patrick smiles behind his hand. He’s happy; he’s so fucking happy. They’re gonna fuck and David’s in this with him and it’s gonna be good and he’s so, so happy.

What David ends up pulling out of his bag are candles, which he scatters around the room and lights with a cheap plastic Bic lighter. Patrick watches in amusement as he narrowly avoids burning his fingers four or five times, hissing and grimacing. Then David turns off the overhead light, so it’s just the lamp and the candles lighting the room.

It is, actually, quite beautiful. He would never have thought of this, but David had cared about it enough to pack candles all the way over to Stevie’s place. Patrick takes another drink, watching as David pulls out lube and condoms, and sets them on the bedside table.

“It’s, um, just in case,” David says. “We don’t have to . . . anything.”

Patrick takes another sip of whiskey.

The two of them are both planners, really, Patrick knows, just different kinds – Patrick likes to organize, to see his way step by meticulous step towards a goal, and David likes to visualize, to imagine the shape of the desired end result and envision all the moving pieces that would come together to make it. Patrick’s seen it a few times now, at the store, how David starts at the end of a project, with the emotion he wants to evoke or the effect he wants to have, with the aesthetic he wants his creation to embody, and works backward. It’s difficult for Patrick to even imagine working that way himself; he thinks linearly, from beginning to end, checking off boxes. But he knows it works for David, that it’s David’s way of attacking a problem, just like spreadsheets and to-do lists.
are Patrick’s.

Which is to say, sure, Patrick made a categorized list to prepare for their first time having sex, but it’s entirely possible that David made a mood board.

David’s draping a translucent yellow piece of cloth over Stevie’s lamp, making the light match the gold of the candles. Patrick stands up, polishing off his whiskey, then puts down his glass and goes to stand behind him. He gets on tiptoes to put his chin over David’s shoulder, wrapping his arms around him. “That’s pretty,” he says.

“No reason we can’t have a little romance,” David says, almost defensively, as if Patrick had made fun of the mood lighting. “Even if it’s no meteor shower.”

“‘You know, Stevie and Jake are gonna get eaten alive by those mosquitos out in the woods.”

David turns around in the circle of his arms, smiling. “Oh my God, I know, I thought that too,” he says, quickly, delightedly. “But let’s not talk about them anymore, hmm?”

“Agreed,” Patrick says, and kisses him. That’s familiar territory, and he lets himself fall into the rhythms they’ve established together over the last weeks, the push and pull of them, the warm slow press of David’s tongue, the softness of his lips, the way they tease and chase each other. Patrick pulls them back towards the bed, one step at a time, until he’s forced to sit down. His hands end up on David’s hips, and he looks up at David’s face. David’s hands land in his hair.

“Still want me to suck you?” David asks, softly. “We can just—make out, some more.”

“I want you,” Patrick says. “Please.” He’s been thinking about it all afternoon, what it’ll look like, what it’ll feel like, to finally let go and trust David to do this with him. He takes a shaky breath.

David sinks to his knees between Patrick’s thighs. “I like hearing you say please,” he says, and rubs his palms over Patrick’s knees, then upwards, towards the fly of his jeans.

“Do you?” Patrick asks, teasing, as David’s hands undo his button and zipper. He’s already a little hard, just from kissing, but he’s getting harder by the second as David gets closer to his cock. God, he wants him.

“Yeah. I like you wanting it.”

This sends a shock up Patrick’s spine. He lets his fingers curl around David’s forearms and holds on tight, stilling the motion of his hands. “Say that again.”

David’s eyes dart immediately to Patrick’s hands, holding his wrists tightly. He licks his lips. “I like how much you want this,” he says, rising up on his knees, tilting his face up to kiss Patrick’s jaw, little soft teasing kisses. “I like how hot you get for it. I like you losing it over just making out with me. I like you losing control. Patrick. I like it. It’s hot. I’m glad you told me.”

Patrick bends down and kisses him, open-mouthed and dirty, breathless, senseless. David stands up higher to kiss him harder, and Patrick groans and collapses backwards onto the bed, urging David down with him.

“Here we are again,” David says, lying on top of him.

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees. It doesn’t feel like it felt on their meteor date, though; it still feels intense, that press of their bodies together, but this time they have a plan. This time David knows what he’s feeling. David sees him. David likes it.
He can fall; David will catch him.

“You like this position, huh.” He shifts on top of Patrick, sliding their clothed bodies together, knees to sternum, and Patrick gives him a swift nod.

“Mm-hm,” he says, because it had featured on his list. He gets more words out: “I like you on top of me.”

“You know, I was gonna suck you off on my knees, keep you in the driver’s seat, but now I’m thinking, maybe I should do you on your back.” He’s kissing Patrick’s throat as he says this. Patrick clenches his fists in his hair, tugging on it, pulling him up for a proper kiss.

He wonders, distantly, if deciding on exact positions was part of David’s mood board, too. What’s the mood for lying down, letting someone on top of you, spreading your legs for them? Whatever it’s called, Patrick wants it, wants David’s weight over his legs, his hips.

He wants David in the driver’s seat.

“That sounds . . . good,” Patrick says.

“Kay. C’mere.” David’s hands work up under Patrick’s shirt and sweater. “Can I take this off?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, hoarsely. “Undress me.”

David does, then kisses Patrick’s bared shoulders, his upper arms, just below his pecs. David wanted this, Patrick remembers; David said he wanted this, back at the store, to see Patrick shirtless. His skin feels hot where David touches him, kisses him. He closes his eyes and gives in to the feeling.

“Look at you, look at all of this,” David is saying, mouthing over Patrick’s collarbone. “And if I recall correctly . . .” He licks his thumb and rubs it over one nipple. Patrick arches up into the touch, groaning.

“David,” he says, just for something to say, just to name the person currently taking him to pieces. “David, yes.”

“You want it so bad, that’s it, just push up against me. Just take it. You want to feel this.” Patrick groans at this, at David saying the things he’s feeling. It’s so intimate, for David to say those things. He’s too into it, messy and out of breath already just from this, and he wants to feel embarrassed about it.

But David doesn’t mind. David likes it, he hears again, in his head, hears it over and over: He likes it, he likes it, he likes me like this.

“I’m gonna make you lose it,” David says, and Patrick can’t help the little whine that escapes his lips.

“Please,” he says, hears himself saying.

David’s fingers are pinching his nipple, plucking it up tight and then rubbing slow hard circles over it. Patrick didn’t even know they could do that, Jesus. That wasn’t in the porn or in the tasteful online articles about respect and communication. David’s fingers alternate between kinds of touch, light and then hard, pinching and then rubbing, and Patrick feels upside-down, deprived of gravity.

“Lemme, lemme see you too,” he says, against David’s onslaught. He tugs at the collar of David’s sweatshirt. David pulls it over his head and tosses it carefully onto the chest at the foot of the bed. He’s gorgeous in the candlelight, gold flickering over his strong shoulders, shadows falling over the
hair on his chest. Patrick’s mouth goes dry; he’s never wanted anyone this way before, with this kind of driving, all-consuming desire. He gives in to it: gives in to the need to touch, getting his hands on David’s skin as David crawls up over him.

“Yeah,” Patrick says, touching him, touching him as much as he wants to, voraciously. “Yeah.” He ranges up David’s arms, and thumbs over his collarbones, and scratches down his pecs and over his nipples. David lets out a little groan. Patrick likes it.

“Think we’re, mmm, getting side-tracked again,” David says.

“If you say so,” Patrick responds, hands still roving, still clutching and rubbing. “I love your chest.”

It’s a dumb thing to say, he thinks as soon as he says it, but it makes David blush, visible even in the low light. “Um. Thank you,” he says, softly. Patrick tries to remember to add that to his list, to come back to that.

Patrick runs his hand along David’s jaw, and David leans down to kiss him again, hot and dirty. Patrick moans up into it, letting the sound out of his chest. After a while David stops holding himself up, lets Patrick feel his weight, their skin pressing together, and David’s hard; David’s hard too. Patrick grinds up against him, too much cloth between them.

He wants them to rub off against each other, and he wants to suck David’s cock, and he wants everything else on his list, too. He blinks for a second, lost in conflicting desires, possibilities swarming in front of him.

“Should I suck you now?” David murmurs, into Patrick’s ear.

“Yeah,” he says, the plan coming back to him, grounding him. Then, remembering that David liked it, he says, “please.”

David moves down his throat, over his chest, back to his open jeans.

“That’s so good. God, Patrick, you’re so hot like this. I love seeing you like this. Tell me what you want me to do. Say it.”

“She me,” Patrick gasps out, breathless. “I want it. Suck me.”

“Yeah, you want it,” David says, and pushes Patrick’s jeans down his thighs. He bites Patrick’s hip, scraping with his teeth. “You’re gonna want more room than that, aren’t you?”

Patrick nods, pushing ineffectually at his jeans, but David’s ahead of him, taking them all the way down and off, along with his underwear and socks. Patrick watches, apprehensive to be so suddenly naked, not sure what he’s got that someone like Jake doesn’t, but David’s slow smile helps him through it.

“So, so pretty,” David intones, kissing his way back up, up the side of Patrick’s calf, over his knee, up to his thigh.

Patrick closes his eyes. Pretty, he thinks. No one’s ever called him that before. He never knew it was allowed, so he never thought to want it. Hearing it now makes his stomach flutter. When he opens his eyes again, David’s kissing his hip, next to his cock. Looking up at him. Waiting.

“I want it,” Patrick says. “Please.”

David doesn’t hesitate, just moves his head and sucks Patrick down, natural as breathing. Patrick is
suddenly inside him, inside the warm, wet pressure of David’s mouth. He curses and bucks wildly, uncontrollably, and he needs to touch David, then, needs to feel him as he takes Patrick’s cock. His hands end up in David’s hair, tugging lightly, then sliding down to his neck, up over his face, his stubble. He’s doing half a crunch, just so he can look down, and David makes a face and pulls off.

“Lie back,” he says, his hand still on Patrick’s dick. “I’ll take care of you.”

“I wanna see you,” he says, shaking his head. “I wanna watch you do me like this.”

David’s eyes gleam in the flickering candlelight. “Okay,” he says. He sounds hoarse. “Up on the pillows, then.”

Patrick scoots back until he’s propped up better, and David crawls up with him, putting his face right back into Patrick’s lap, licking over the head of his cock before looking back up at him.

“Spread your legs,” he says, the words sending a wild little shudder through Patrick’s body. Patrick nods, and does it, so David can rub his broad, delicate hand up the inside of Patrick’s thigh, over the soft sensitive skin there, and curl his fingers around Patrick’s balls.

“That’s good,” Patrick says, breathlessly. His hands are trembling. He feels like he’s floating. “That’s so good, David.”

David smiles softly and puts his mouth back on Patrick’s dick, lips sliding down slowly, tongue moving wet and sure. Then he starts the blowjob in earnest, and Patrick realizes, very quickly, that he’s not going to last long.

“Fuck. Fuck, David,” he breathes, the words spilling from him involuntarily, because David’s mouth is a revelation, David’s lips and tongue and the slow way he closes his eyes while he sucks, like he loves it, like he just wants to fucking taste it. Patrick wants to thrust but David is holding his hips, keeping him still, and moving his head instead, up and down for long, hard sucks, the flat of his tongue against Patrick’s slit, the drag of his lips over Patrick’s length. It’s not gentle, or slow: it’s ruthless and steady and uncompromising, drawing Patrick irresistibly higher and higher. He’s not in control of it, his body clenching and gasping without restraint, and David’s the one who’s taking him there; David’s got him.

He kneads David’s shoulders, says his name, and David responds, moaning in his throat, and that ratchets Patrick up again, the idea that David could be getting off on this, the idea that he wants Patrick’s cock as much as Patrick wants his slick, hot mouth.

The feeling builds in him, an overwhelming mounting tension, a powerful, incredible, trembling sensation. He looks down at David, at David’s expressive hands on his body and David’s swift, sure mouth on his cock, at David who he can trust with this, at David who wants him to feel good.

He’s making noises now, without even meaning to, high-pitched and strange. What used to be words turn into senseless babbling and moaning, but the sound seems far away, and there’s a rushing in his ears instead. He’s so hard now, so close, adrift in the sheer sensation of it, his mind and his thoughts dissolving into the pure heat of his body, his body wanting and taking, feeling and being, here in this moment, with David’s eyelashes soft and dark against his cheeks and David’s hands all over him and David’s beautiful lips sucking him like he loves it, like he can’t get enough of it.

“David, I—I—” but he can’t remember the words, can’t remember anything but David’s name, feels his thighs trembling and his body shaking and David there, David on top of him, David keeping him still and giving him all of this, and then David squeezes his thighs and sucks hard on the head of his cock and Patrick is coming into his mouth, his body spilling and spilling, like turning inside out, like
losing himself completely, like dying.

It goes on for a long, long time, David’s mouth gentling him through it, through the aftershocks that feel like coming again and again. And then Patrick doesn’t feel anything at all, really, for a long time. When he has a sense of the edges of his body again, he realizes that he’s holding David’s hair way too tightly. David’s mouth isn’t on his cock anymore; instead, he’s resting his cheek against Patrick’s thigh.

He lets go of David’s hair immediately, eyes focusing as he blinks down at him.

“Oh, there you are,” David says, softly. His voice sounds raspy. “You were great.”

“Sorry about your hair,” Patrick says, patting it. It’s not going back down the way it was, though.

“We didn’t talk about it, but I’ll let you know for future outings that, actually? I love being yanked around by the hair. It was really hot.”

“Well, that’s lucky, then,” Patrick says, breathing out, still a little annoyed with himself. His mind is gradually shuffling back to him. “You were—David. David. That was amazing. You were amazing.”

“Kinda felt amazing from here, too,” David admits, a twist to his lips. He sits up a little and pets Patrick’s thigh with his ring-clad hand. “Been a while since I gave a blowjob so enthusiastically received.”

A distant part of Patrick wants to feel embarrassed for all the weird sounds he made, for the unnegotiated hairpulling, for the way he was too far gone to even warn David properly that he was going to come. He wasn’t polite at all. He’s never had sex, before, where he wasn’t polite.

“Come here,” Patrick says, “come up here.”

David shakes his head. “You come down here.” So Patrick does, shuffles down so he’s lying flat on the bed with David. He cups David’s jaw in his hand and kisses him, softly, sweetly. He tastes like Patrick’s come, God.

“I’ve never—I never knew sex could be like that,” he says. “I didn’t know.”

“Yeah. I get that.” David smiles, and kisses him again. “I’m pretty spectacular.”

Patrick laughs, kisses David’s jaw, the prickle of his stubble. “You don’t know,” he hears himself saying, truth spilling out of him like his orgasm. “You don’t know how much I felt that, how intense it was for me. David. God. I’ve never—I was so nervous, before. You make me feel things I’ve never felt. I’ve never felt like that.”

“Um,” David says. “I am very moved by that.” He coughs. “But honestly I can do better.”

“You’ll give me a fucking heart attack,” Patrick mumbles, taking his mouth again. It’s hard to kiss him, because he’s smiling again. Patrick loves that, loves the feel of David’s smile against his lips. He wants to make him smile and smile, all the time, wants to fuck him until he can’t stop smiling.

He moves his hand down David’s chest, trailing through the soft dark hair, lingering on a nipple, grinning when David squirms, ticklish, against Patrick’s fingers on his ribs.

“You wanna get out of these?” he asks, tugging on the waistband of David’s pants.
“Thought you wanted to get inside them,” David teases. Patrick tugs again, harder, impatient, and David gasps, and changes his tune. “Okay, okay, yes, let’s do it, mmm-hmm.” Patrick’s feeling his focus come back to him, and he starts imagining all the things he can do to David.

His list is very, very long.

He finds that the buzzing, overwhelmed nervousness he was feeling before has faded. His body feels cleaned out and calm, by the orgasm, by the way David made him feel seen. With the anxiety dissipating from Patrick’s mind there’s more room for everything else he’s been feeling: curiosity, and desire, and the deep urge to make David absolutely lose his mind, the way he did for Patrick.

He helps David pull his pants and socks off, then comes back up for his underwear, which is soft and clinging and black and probably expensive. Patrick feels an urge, and doesn’t think about it, just gives in to it, nuzzling his face up against David’s cock, through his underwear.

“You smell good,” he says.

“Fuck,” David pronounces, above him. “Fuck, that’s hot.”

Patrick opens his mouth, running his lips over the concealed shape of David’s cock. It feels big, but then, that might be a matter of perspective.


David lifts his hips and pushes the underwear down, and Patrick sees them all the way off his legs. Then David’s naked in front of him, his whole body spread out for Patrick to see and to touch, everything he was never supposed to want.

“What should I do?” Patrick asks.

“Anything,” David breathes. “Just—whatever you want to try.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, softly, grateful. He bends his head down between David’s legs and bites him, a little ways above the knee, because he’s been wanting to try that, to get his teeth on David’s soft skin, his thick, beautiful thighs. David twitches under him.

“I wanna know what you’ve been thinking. About me,” Patrick says, then gives him another bite. “Will you tell me?”

“Ungh. Well, now I’m thinking a lot about your teeth.”

“That’s good,” Patrick says. He bites and licks his way up to David’s balls, then licks those too, sucking them into his mouth briefly. He likes the way doing it makes him feel—tender, useful—and he loves the way it makes David squirm beneath him, his fingers twisting in the sheets. He moves up again, licking and sucking at the underside of David’s cock, rubbing his mouth against the soft skin; he knows it probably doesn’t look very expert but he can’t bring himself to care, just wants to taste, just wants to feel. He sucks and licks and kisses hungrily.

“You feel so good,” Patrick says, kissing his way up to the head. He sucks in the tip, running his tongue over the slit. “You taste good.”

“Yeah?” David asks, breathless. His hands come up from the bed to knead Patrick’s bare shoulders. “You like it?”
“I love it,” Patrick says, honestly, and sucks him again. It’s hard to get very much in his mouth at once, and he pulls off, thinking, then takes him in again, going a little deeper and using his hand for the base. David’s cock jerks on his tongue, and Patrick makes a noise, surprised and turned on.

But he’s restless, hungry, and he wants more: more of David’s body, more of this joyful feeling of newness. He pulls off David’s dick and crawls up his body. He gets his mouth on David’s belly, kisses up the trail of hair, lingers on the soft line just below his pecs, tonguing him there; gets his mouth on David’s nipple and sucks. They’re skin to skin, now, bodies naked and aligned and it feels so good, like every point of contact between them is a new erogenous zone, every part of David’s body beneath him hot and perfect.

“Just gonna—” David squirms beneath him, shuffling until he can reach the lube on the nightstand. It’s a little jar with a fancy label, and when Patrick takes it from him and opens it, it smells sharp, clean, like aloe.

“What did you want me to do with this?” he asks, straddling David’s lap, smiling. David’s eyes are dark, and he catches Patrick’s wrists loosely. His fingertips trace down the center of Patrick’s palms.

“Remember what I said about your hands?”

Patrick nods. “You said you liked them.” He’s been thinking about that a lot, about David liking his hands. They’ve always seemed unremarkable, to him. He thinks they can do good things, though, to David, to David’s body. He wants to try.

“Will you put them on me?”

Patrick’s breathing picks up. His cock is already getting interested again, with David spread out beneath him like this, with David saying things like that. He nods.

He dips two fingers into the jar, gathering enough to spread over his palms and fingers. “Then what,” he asks. He bends down to kiss David’s mouth before he can answer. “Then what,” he asks again.

“Get me nice and slick,” David whispers. “Let me feel your hands on me.”

Patrick does, stroking David’s dick hand over hand, up from the base to the tip, squeezing firmly, and David falls back to the bed again, groaning. It makes Patrick feel powerful, to be the cause of that.

“I love doing this to you,” Patrick says, fervent. “I love making you feel this way, God, David.”

“You’re doing—ah! You’re doing really good. This is so good. You wanna make me come like this?”

Patrick thinks about it.

“No,” he says. David looks up at him, surprised. Patrick shifts so he’s holding David’s dick in one hand, then moves down over him again, getting his mouth on David’s nipple, licking it, biting it, blowing on it; David groans and arches, first his shoulders to get more contact with Patrick’s mouth and then his hips to get more contact with Patrick’s hand. Patrick speeds up on David’s dick, loving the hot, slick feel of him inside his fist, and sucks harder on David’s nipple, drawing a surprised series of gasps from David’s lips.

David spread out beneath him, David’s body arching and responding to his touch: Patrick can’t get enough of it.
“I wanna put my fingers in you,” Patrick breathes, against David’s throat. “Like we said.”

“Yeah,” David says, hands on Patrick’s shoulders. “Yeah, you can—you can do that.”

Patrick gets a little more lube. “Do I—how should I—how do you want it?”

“Go slow,” David says, leaning up to kiss him. “I like it slow. Long, slow, strokes inside.”

“Okay,” Patrick whispers. It feels like being given a secret. He rubs down behind David’s balls, then slips a finger in, nice and slow, pushing up and forward like it’d said in the articles. “Like that?”

“Yeah. You can—give me two,” David says. Patrick does, gives him two, and before long he’s stroking in and out like David said, and fisting his cock, and David’s twisting in pleasure beneath him. He loves it, that he can do this with just his hands, that David would let him do this.

“Wanna do this to you forever,” he hears himself say. “David. I just want to fuck you like this. Just keep fucking you like this.”

“Ungh,” David moans out, gasping, shuddering. His body is so beautiful, the way it arches and moves. The way his hips roll down against Patrick’s fingers, up against Patrick’s fist. “That’s, that’s fine,” he manages. “Gonna make me come pretty soon, though.”

“Don’t want you to,” Patrick says, mouth on David’s nipple, his chest, kissing up to his throat. He slows his hand down, squeezing David’s cock, feeling it, how good it feels, how hard against him. “I wanna suck you off. Or, or, you could, my thighs, I could, between my thighs—”

David’s hand comes up to land in Patrick’s hair, then strokes down to cup his cheek. “You’re doing so good right now,” he says. “Fucking me so good, Patrick. Don’t have to do it all at once.”

Taking a breath, Patrick nods, licks his lips.

“You look perfect like this,” he says, feeling desperate, feeling wild, David’s thighs shifting beneath him and David’s head thrown back. “You look so fucking good, I just want it all, I want all of you—”

David cries out at that, his hips snapping up, and Patrick moves with him, tightens his grip and speeds up and does everything he can think of, thumbs hard over the head, curls his fingers deep inside, pressing hard. David’s whining now, head tossed to the side, eyes closed, lost in his own pleasure, and it’s the most beautiful thing Patrick has ever seen.

He wonders if that’s what he looked like, sounded like.

“Fuck me,” David’s intoning, between breaths, “fuck me, Patrick, fuck me, fuck me, fuck me—”

“Gonna fuck you,” Patrick agrees, sweat running down the back of his neck, his whole body aching for it. “Come for me, yeah, David, I wanna see it, I wanna see you, please—”

And then David’s hips shudder up against him and he does, it’s happening, David’s coming all over Patrick’s hand, all over his stomach, and Patrick feels it like it’s his own orgasm again, feels release and satisfaction as David spills between them.

He wants to lick it off. He spares a thought for whether that’s normal. He gives up on that thought after a few seconds.

“Next time I’m gonna swallow you down,” he says, into David’s ear, still jacking him slowly. “Next
time I want your cock inside me.”

David shudders, and his dick twitches, a last little spurt of come dribbling out. Patrick licks his lips. So, that’s a big yes on the dirty talk, then. Mentally, he puts a satisfied little check mark next to that item.

“God, you really did make a list, didn’t you,” David croaks out, his eyes still closed.

Patrick laughs, pleased and embarrassed, and grabs some tissues from the nightstand to clean them up. There isn’t a trashcan in sight so he forces himself to get up and throw them away in the bathroom, washing his hands while he’s at it. “I really did,” he calls back, over his shoulder.

When he comes back into the room, David’s propped up on one elbow, looking at him. “You want me to fuck your thighs?”

“I . . . want you to fuck me every way it’s possible to fuck me,” Patrick says, heart pounding in his chest. David’s mouth opens, his lips just parting, and then he closes it again.

“Oh,” he says. His face looks soft, after he’s come, like he’s too tired to put his usual effort into making it move around.

Gingerly, Patrick lies down next to him, on his side. “You don’t like that?” He runs his hand over David’s belly. He doesn’t want to stop touching. He never wants to stop.

“I like it fine,” David says, sounding a little offended. His face is still smiling softly, though. “It’s just not—what a lot of people want from me. A lot of cis men, anyhow.”

Patrick nods against him. He can see that, can see that people would make assumptions about what David would like to do in bed. “I don’t want make you feel that way,” he says, and kisses David’s shoulder. “Like anything’s . . . expected.”

“You haven’t,” David says, turning his head to look at him.

“Yeah, but,” Patrick frowns. “I’m really new to all this, and I’m worried I might, might make mistakes, or get stuff wrong.”

David stretches his neck to kiss Patrick’s chin. “There’s no real wrong. Patrick. You can just ask me.”

“That seems too simple,” Patrick says, doubtfully, which makes David smile. Then he takes a breath and asks. “Do you like . . . doing that?”

David nods, letting Patrick get away with not actually saying the words. It was one thing in the heat of the moment, but it’s not the same now.

“I like fucking people,” David says, easily. “I like being fucked, too. As you observed.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, because at least that’s some data. “You don’t, um, prefer one or the other?” The internet said that some people did, though Patrick didn’t really get why that would be the case anatomically.

“Depends on the day. And the person.” David kisses him slowly, all soft lips and just the edge of tongue, like their first kiss. “I’d love to try both with you, though. We can figure it out together.”

“And, in terms of the day, is it mostly weekends that get you hot, or like, Tuesday afternoons . . . ?”
David gives him a playful shove, and Patrick laughs at his own joke. He realizes, suddenly, that he’s never felt this comfortable naked with another person before, never felt this absence of anxiety. It’s astonishing.

“I’ll fuck you every day of the week, if you want,” David says, and it’s still the joke but his voice is low and husky.

Patrick shivers. “That sounds good,” he says. His dick is half-hard, and he doesn’t know what he wants to do about it. He could ask David to do something about it, they could see if he’s ready again. Or he could wait, let it subside; they still have time, and could fuck again later. Right now he loves the feeling of it, of being perpetually a little turned on while they’re joking around in bed.

“I like making it good for you,” David says.

Patrick’s thoughts feel soft, like a curling wisp of smoke, relaxed, so he lets the words rise up from his throat unimpeded. “You’ve made it so good for me. I don’t know how to tell you. You’ve made me—I’ve never felt this way. I want the same for you. I want to do that for you.”

“You are,” David says. He swallows, then his eyes dart down to Patrick’s chest. “No one’s ever let me do this before. Take care of them. Um. I’ve been told I don’t have the most nurturing energy.”

Patrick grins, runs his hand through David’s hair. “I trust you,” he says, seriously, and David meets his eyes, then looks away, then blinks rapidly.

“Um. Thank you,” he says.

Patrick kisses him.

They clean up properly, taking turns in the bathroom, then get dressed again, David in a baggy black sweater and some soft, loose sweatpants, Patrick in pajama bottoms and a t-shirt. David spends some time running his hands up Patrick arms, toying with the hems of the sleeves.

“Don’t get to see you in short sleeves that often,” David says.

“Look who’s talking,” Patrick replies, laughing.

“So. What do you think we should do now?” David’s voice is low and teasing.

“I brought cookies,” Patrick tells him. David’s face lights up.

They wander into the kitchen for water, and Patrick pulls out the cookies, picking one up and taking a bite. David comes over to him and grabs his wrist, leaning in to steal a bite for himself.

“Hey,” Patrick says, laughing. “Get your own.”

“Tastes better when it’s yours,” David says, swallowing, licking his lips. Patrick blinks at him for a moment, remembering the chocolates he fed David on their meteor date. He breaks off a piece of cookie and holds it up.

“Here,” he says.

David’s eyes darken, and he eats from Patrick’s hand. Patrick likes the way his mouth opens for him, the way he keeps eye contact with Patrick while his lips close, brushing Patrick’s fingertips. Between this and the chocolates, he’s starting to think he might have kind of a . . . thing, about feeding David.
He tries not to get anxious about it; David certainly doesn’t seem to mind.

“You look hot, like that,” Patrick says, voice low. “I like your mouth.”

“You said,” David smiles. Patrick holds up another piece of cookie.

In the end, David eats way more than his fair share of them, though Patrick has to admit some culpability, since he can’t stop feeding his cookies to David.

After a lot of David’s lips on Patrick’s fingers, it becomes too much; Patrick pushes David up against the counter in Stevie’s kitchen and kisses him, taking the chocolate chip taste back for himself.

The heat is growing between them again, and Patrick feels . . . different, like something has been set free inside him. He takes David’s mouth hungrily, open and wanting, pushing his tongue inside, and his hands are moving restlessly over David’s back, his sides, his shoulders, cradling his jaw and then moving again, down to rub over his hips.

“Feels like you’ve got something on your mind,” David grins, between kisses.

Patrick’s heart is in his throat as he thinks about asking for it.

“Yeah,” he says, coming to a decision. “I—would you do it to me? What we were talking about before?”

David pulls back, eyebrows raised. “What, anal?”

He sounds so offended that Patrick has to suppress a laugh. “Well, it’s a Friday, so I thought . . .”

“I meant, like . . . I thought, maybe when we get a few more, a few more, um, trophies under our belts, when we’ve won a few more touchdowns . . .”

Patrick smiles and rubs his shoulders. “It’s okay if you don’t want to,” he says, falling back into kissing him. “What do you want to do?”

There are lots of things Patrick wants to try. But he thought—he wants this the most. He’s been thinking about it, fantasizing about it, wondering what it’ll feel like.

David speaks from inside their kisses, as if Patrick’s mouth isn’t even there. “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s just that, mmmph, many people don’t jump immediately into doing that their first time . . . in the park.”

“But I’ve got you using sports talk and it’s turning me on so much,” Patrick protests. David blinks at him, so Patrick wraps his hands around his biceps and holds him still. “Seriously, we can do it another time.”

“Why do you want to do it?” David asks. “Is it—is it about the list? Checking things off?”

Patrick frowns, because he can see, now, how it might seem that way to David, like he’s going through items to be completed. Like his lists of errands at the store. He shakes his head, firmly.

“The list is for inspiration. So I could feel, um. Prepared. It’s not . . . chores.”

“Okay,” David says, mouth twisting, eyes looking up at the ceiling before coming back to look at Patrick again. “Okay. So, why?”

Patrick lets him go, steps away. He turns to the sink to get more water, even though his glass is still
half full. “The usual reasons. Boring reasons.”

David doesn’t follow him to the sink. “Because it’s gay?” he hazards. “Because you haven’t done it before. Because you’re not supposed to want it.”

And, see, Patrick had known that David wouldn’t find him sexually interesting. “I know I’m not supposed to care about that stuff,” he says, turning on the tap and watching the water pour. The articles were very clear on this point, that stereotypes about gay sex were damaging and set up unbalanced expectations. That there are no tests to pass.

“You can care about whatever you want,” David says, quietly. “But actually, I do kind of think this is about . . . lists. Still. Different kinds of lists. You know you can be gay without doing that, right? You can never do that at all. From either side.”

Patrick turns around, taking a breath. “I know.”

“I don’t want you to have some image in your head that—”

“I know,” Patrick says, more firmly. David purses his lips. “It’s not—it’s not that. I feel . . . plenty gay already. Overwhelmingly so, at times.”

This brings the ghost of a smile to David’s lips. “There’s plenty of time,” he says. “We can do that—we don’t have to do that now. I’m not expecting it. I told you I like it both ways.”

“Fine,” Patrick says. “I’m not going to pressure you, either. You can say no.”

“Then, no,” David says, and he looks like he’s surprising even himself. He licks his lips slowly. “Will you come back here and kiss me again?”

Patrick will. Patrick does.

“It was also, just, we might not have privacy again for a while,” he breathes against David’s lips, a while later, keeping his eyes closed.

“Then let’s make the most of it,” David says. He tilts Patrick’s chin up with one finger and kisses him lightly. “There are lots of things privacy is good for.”

They get back to the bedroom, this time shedding their clothes without hesitation, getting back on the bed and kissing, rolling around, and Patrick thinks he’d be satisfied just rubbing off against each other like this. Maybe it’s what they should do. Keep things slow.

“You ever,” David is saying, between kisses, “you ever put anything in your ass before?”

The question is a surprise, like David’s still thinking about what Patrick asked him for. He blishes, but answers honestly. “A few times,” he says. “Just . . . fingers. I, uh, really liked it, though. And—and outside, I liked that too.”

“Okay,” David says, kissing his throat. He looks at Patrick for a second, and Patrick can feel the mood board being edited. “You wanna take some shower time, real quick?”

“So, before we came over here tonight, I . . . did. That. I wanted—you said, said you wanted to put your tongue in my, in me, and I looked it up—”

“That’s good,” David interrupts, soothingly. “That’s so good. That’s just what I was thinking about, in fact.”

David gives him a little slap on the thigh. “Roll over.”

Patrick buries his hot face against the pillow. He feels exposed, laid out like this, but a second later David’s touching him and he doesn’t feel alone in it.

“God, look at that,” David says. He runs his hands up Patrick’s thighs, over his ass, palms flat against his back all the way to his shoulders. “Look at you.”

“I can’t,” Patrick says, because he’s breathing fast and if he doesn’t say something he’s gonna lose it completely. No one’s ever touched him quite like this before. He wants more of it, being under David’s hands.

“Well, you make quite a picture.” A kiss, pressed to the back of Patrick’s neck. “You okay?”


“How?” Another kiss.

“On top of me,” Patrick says. “All over me, will you—”

David settles down over him, skin to skin, his dick just starting to get hard against Patrick’s ass. He drapes his arms over Patrick like a blanket, and kisses Patrick’s shoulders, soft and slow. “Like this?”

“Yeah,” Patrick sighs. David’s touching him everywhere, hands and mouth moving, the tops of his feet rubbing back and forth over Patrick’s calves.

“You want me to pin you down, sometime?” David asks, his mouth still moving gently over Patrick’s back. Patrick doesn’t remember anyone ever kissing his back like this before, languorously, for its own sake. It makes his muscles relax, one by one. “Or tie you up?”

“Maybe,” Patrick says, but his body responds immediately to that idea, of being bound hand and foot, all the decisions taken away from him. His cock is hard underneath him, pressed against the sheets.

“Put it on the list,” David suggests, and Patrick laughs, some of the tension dissipating. He feels the shape of David’s answering smile against his neck. It makes him feel like they’re in this together. They build beautiful things, when they work together.

Then David’s moving down, kissing his way down Patrick’s spine, past his waist, over his ass. “Get comfy,” David advises, and Patrick spares a thought to wonder why before David’s hands are holding his cheeks apart and David’s lips and tongue are on him.

It seemed dirty, when he came across it initially in his reading, and he wasn’t sure it was a real thing at first, like maybe it was some more weird shit that *Cosmo* dreamed up to fuck with his internet searches and confuse him. But he read more, and he found porn about it, and he started to feel curious, hot, wondering what it would feel like to have that done to him, or to do it himself, the newness of it, the intimacy of it. When David mentioned it at the store, that made him want to circle and underline it on his list, to give it top priority.

None of his research has prepared him for this, though, for the sensation, wet and strong and sure, of David licking him, pressing hard against the sensitive skin, before slowly, slowly tonguing him open.

“Oh, oh, fuck,” he gasps. “Fuck.”
“Yeah,” David says. “You like it?”

“Do that again,” he says, and shivers at the breath of David’s laugh across his skin before David puts his head back down and does it again.

He doesn’t know how long David does it for, but it feels like forever, like time draws out into taffy while David presses so soft and wet inside of him. It’s good at first, amazing, but the more David does it the better it gets, as Patrick feels himself opening around David’s tongue. It’s pressing further and further inside him on each thrust, and David’s lips are on his hole, moving and sucking, like he’s kissing it.

“Jesus,” he says. “Jesus, fuck, that . . . I. Okay. Wow.” It feels so good Patrick almost wants to laugh, doesn’t know what reaction would be right for the soft, building pleasure that David’s working him into. It’s like doing himself with his fingers, but a hundred times that, like his body has a whole new setting. “David,” he says, shocked into speech. “David, please. Please don’t stop. Please.”

David . . . stops.

Patrick groans in frustration.

“Sorry! Just gonna—hang on.”

Patrick presses his forehead against his folded hands and tries to breathe. He wants David’s mouth back. He hears a zipper, then David coming back to the bed.

“Just gonna make you nice and wet, Patrick. Gonna make it so good for you.”

Patrick can’t really imagine how it could possibly be better, but then David’s finger is moving gently inside him, pressing slick into him, and that hard pressure is such a contrast with the firm wetness of David’s tongue that he bucks, cries out.

“Shhh, shhh, you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Patrick says. “Please.”

“Good.” David sounds satisfied, warm. Patrick dares a look over his shoulder.

“Are you, uh. Doing okay?”

“Mmm, I’m very good,” David says, positioning himself again, sliding down the bed. “Your thighs are trembling. You’re gorgeous. You want more?”

“Yeah,” Patrick manages, and David gives him more, varying pressure and speed, moving his tongue in unpredictable patterns, making Patrick cry out and grip the sheets. Once he pulls back entirely and blows on him, and Patrick almost can’t take it, the sensation is so intense.

“Holy, holy, fuck,” he chants, spreading his legs wider for David’s shoulders.

“Good, huh,” David says, teasing him. Patrick has to just nod fervently against the pillow beneath him.

“S’intense,” he says. “So good.” His cock is hard, and he’s grinding against the bed, but it’s almost like an afterthought.

“You wanna jerk yourself off and come like this, with my tongue in your ass? Or I could finger
you.” David says it all matter-of-fact, all the things that had made Patrick’s hand shake while he tried to write them down. That seems like a long time ago, now, with his body drifting through pleasure, spread out for David’s mouth on his ass. He’s having trouble remembering what he was so worried about, he feels so good.

“You sure—you don’t want to fuck me?” Patrick asks, drunk on this feeling, wanting nothing but more of it. There’s a silence, and eventually Patrick twists his neck to look at David. He can’t read David’s face, not at all, which is an entirely new experience that Patrick doesn’t like. Fuck. David had said no. “Sorry. I’m sorry, never mind, you don’t have to,” he adds, hastily.

“I want to, though,” David says, voice low. There’s a click of a cap and David’s fingers are on him again, two of them this time, pressing in and spreading him wider. “I want to, but I also want to do the right thing, and go slow, and be good to you.” His fingers have none of the hesitation of his voice, fucking in and out of Patrick’s ass, curling up to reach his prostate. It’s good, it’s so good, better than when Patrick tried this on himself in the shower, like his body is unfolding itself. God, he loves David doing him like this, making him feel like this.

“You’re—ungh, fuck—you’re being pretty good to me right now,” Patrick reasons. He wants more of David’s thick, clever fingers, but more than that he wants to see David’s face. “Let me—come here, let me turn over—”

David pulls out gently and Patrick flips himself onto his back. He feels sweaty, debauched, cock hard and nipples tight from where they rubbed against the sheets, spread out before David on the bed. He looks up, and David looks down, gaze running over Patrick’s body. He’s never felt this sexy before, this wanted. He’s never wanted anyone back this much.

“I’m just gonna—be back,” David says, grabbing something from his bag and heading naked for the bathroom. Patrick flings an arm over his eyes and tries to get his breath back, listening to the water run and David gargling and swooshing. That’s nice, he supposes. Considerate.

“Okay. Come here. Kiss me,” David says, upon returning. Patrick does; he tastes like mouthwash. He slides his hands slowly around David’s sides, loving the way David’s thigh slips confidently between Patrick’s legs. He arches up against him, grinding their hips together. It feels fucking fantastic.

Everything with David feels fantastic. That’s why he wants everything.

“We can just do it like this,” Patrick whispers, grinding up against him.

“Mmm,” David says, and it’s his equivocating hum. Patrick strokes his face.

“David. It would really help me if you’d . . . tell me what you want, here.”

“I want you to feel good,” he says, bending to kiss Patrick’s neck. “I want you to feel good about it.”

“I’m going to,” Patrick says, pulling him up again with a hand on his jaw. “David. I told you. I already do. You’ve made it so good for me.” He leans up and kisses his mouth. “What do you want for you?”

David gives him a wry little smile. “It’s possible that I’m also not great at, um. Making choices. About sex.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, because it makes sense. Casual relationships, one-night stands, sex with people like Jake: no room to talk like they’ve been talking, to really say the things you want. “So, we can make choices together, okay?”
David, nods, pressing his forehead down against Patrick’s collarbone. Patrick tries to figure out what to say next.

“I could suck you off?” he tries.

When he speaks, David’s breath is hot and wet against Patrick’s skin. “Patrick. Ever since you said it, I can’t stop thinking about it. Fucking you. I mean, I was thinking about it before that too, obviously, basically from that time I came into Ray’s and saw you bent over a table, but—fuck. The sounds you made when I was rimming you. I bet you’re so pretty when you get fucked. I want to do that to you. Make you feel it. It can be so good. I bet you’d feel so good around me.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, “so if you want that, and I want that, then why does it matter?” Patrick murmurs, against David’s mouth. David pulls back, brow furrowed.

“It matters, because I’m supposed to know better, and like, guide you, and I’m supposed to tell you no when you have a dumb idea that’s going to hurt you, or that you’re gonna—that you’re gonna regret.” He frowns. “I’m supposed to make sure you’re okay.”

Patrick strokes his thumbs over David’s cheekbones, like he did when he applied the under-eye serum earlier that morning. “I’m not a sixteen year old virgin,” Patrick says, softly, and David winces a little. He wonders if he accidentally got the age right. “I’m a grown man, and if you don’t want to do this with me we can do something else, that’s fine. But you don’t have to protect me. Not from you.”

“Okay,” David says.

“I trust you,” Patrick says.

“Yeah, you said. That makes it so much worse.” David presses a kiss to the hollow of Patrick’s throat, where he’s vulnerable.

“I think I’m gonna like it, David,” Patrick says, all in a rush. “I think I’m gonna like it a lot, the—the way it’s gonna feel. When you do it. Whenever you do it.”

“Oh,” David says, surprised. “Okay.”

“I’ve been thinking about it. All the time. Having you inside. I’ve been thinking about how good you’re gonna make it for me.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna make it so good for you, Patrick.” His voice is low, barely audible. Patrick’s skin is tingling.

“Yeah? What’re you gonna do to me?”

“I’m gonna finger you open. Wide open. Gonna get you so slick and ready.”

Patrick’s cock softened a little while they were talking, but with that he’s almost there again, ready to thrust up against David’s belly, to rut like an animal. He allows himself a little thrust or two. David thrusts back, picking up the rhythm.

“I’m still wet from what you did to me,” Patrick breathes, in his ear. “Feels slippery.”

David turns his head and takes his mouth, rough, hard, and Patrick answers the same way, caught up in the sudden heat of it. He scrabbles in the sheets and finds the plastic container of lube that David used earlier, pressing it into his hands. They’re still kissing, sloppily, desperate, so Patrick only hears
as David clicks it open and then closed, and then David’s hand is sliding down and Patrick’s legs are coming up and David’s inside him again, two fingers stroking slowly, in gentle contrast to the harsh, biting kisses David’s giving him.

“Lift up a little more,” David says. He tilts his hips and David slips a pillow underneath him. It puts David a little further out of reach, so Patrick has to stretch upward to kiss his jaw, his neck, opening his mouth to suck kisses onto the stubble, down his throat, over his collarbones.

“You gonna fuck me, David?” Patrick asks, moving with David’s fingers inside him. “You gonna do me?”

“Yeah,” David says, swallowing, breathing hard. “Gonna give you what you want.”

Patrick grabs David’s forearm. “You want it too,” he says. “I want you to get what you want too.”

“I want it,” David says, in a low, sensual murmur. “God, Patrick. I want to fuck you. Feel you all around me. I want to make it so good you want it all the time, want to ride my cock and my fingers and my tongue, all the time. All the time.” His hand keeps pace with his words, withdrawing gently and then slipping back in, slow slow slow, soft soft soft, until Patrick’s groaning with need.

“That sounds—that sounds good,” Patrick says. “More, I want more, please—”

“Yeah,” David says, bending down to kiss his mouth. He draws all the way out and then puts a third finger into Patrick, the stretch a little better, a little bigger. “I know you do. I know you need it. What else?”

“Faster,” Patrick gasps, rocking his hips a little to demonstrate, rocking himself on David’s fingers. Riding him, like he said. “God you feel so good inside me.”

“Good,” David says. “That’s good. Can’t wait to get my cock in you, Patrick, gonna make it so good for you.” He thrusts, and twists, and works Patrick expertly, until he’s back where he was when David was rimming him, deeply and intensely turned on from the inside out, pressure building and building where David’s stroking him hard and slow and sure. What started as a warm tingling now feels like a heady rush of pleasure, every time David’s fingers push against his prostate, like an entirely different kind of sex, something he never knew his body could do.

“Fuck, I want you so bad,” Patrick moans. “I want—this is what I—this is what I wanted, this is what I fantasized about, your, your cock inside me.”


“You gonna fuck me now?” It’s a genuine question.

David nods. “Yeah,” he says again, and bends down to kiss him, lips soft and yielding. “I trust you, too.”

Patrick moans and fucks on his fingers, but a couple seconds later David’s drawing them back out. Patrick watches, chest heaving, legs spread, sweat trickling down his temples, as David rolls on a condom and gets a little more lube.

“Tell me everything,” he says, severely, coming back to align their bodies. “I’m fucking serious, Patrick. Tell me.”

“I’ll tell you,” Patrick says, and then David’s pressing against him, pressing into him, blunt pressure,
and Patrick lifts his hips and yields to it and feels himself, just like that, penetrated. He’s stretched, spread out for David’s cock, and it feels good, good in his body, and good to think about, too, that he can do this, can be this.

“Patrick,” David says, maybe to make him talk, maybe just to say it.

“Feels, God. So big. Is that just the tip?”

“Yeah,” David says. He’s holding back. Patrick reaches up, strokes his temple, watches as David nuzzles down against his hand. “You can tell me to stop,” he says, eyes closed, kissing Patrick’s palm.


He slides down into Patrick a little at a time, and every little motion, every little movement shocks sparks along Patrick’s nerves, makes him feel impossibly full and getting fuller. It’s a weird sensation, big and uncomfortable, and he shifts his hips restlessly, looking for the right angle, the right movement, to make it work. He hears his voice emerge from his throat, a low frustrated whine.

David puts his palm on Patrick’s chest.

“Breathe,” David says, fingers splayed against his skin. “Against my hand. Breathe.”

Patrick breathes in so that his chest pushes up against David’s hand, then out, then in again, and then he feels himself relaxing, feels David sinking into him all the way, groaning as he goes.

“There you are,” Patrick says, blinking rapidly, grinning. “That’s—that’s—oh.”

“Take your time,” David says, clearly trying not to laugh and not to thrust at the same time.

“You’re inside me,” Patrick says, breath coming fast, meeting David’s eyes.

“Yeah. You want me to stop?”

“No, I want—” Patrick squirms a little. It’s—it feels good, the stretch, the sensation of it, but he’s—if he could just—

David smiles. “I got you.” He hitches Patrick up higher, and rocks his hips, just a little, just a fraction of an inch, and Patrick’s whole body lights up again with that new, impossible pleasure: he throws his head back and groans, involuntarily. David does it again, and again, and suddenly Patrick’s scrabbling at David’s shoulders, lifting up to meet him, mouth open, gasping.

“That’s it,” David says, holding his hands, his arms, any part of him he can catch. “That’s it, just take it. Is it good?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Patrick chants out, lost for other words, lost in the feeling of it, of being fucked. He’s being fucked. David’s cock is inside him. Jesus. “David. It’s so good. David. Fuck me.”

David kisses his thigh and does it, fucks him slow first and then eventually faster, and Patrick is too far gone to know where his hands are, his body tingling and numb and wild with sensation all at once, his limbs heavy as David fucks him and fucks him. David’s slick hand wraps around his cock and Patrick arches into it, lets David take him in two ways at once, and it’s perfect, and he doesn’t
ever want it to stop, but he can’t help but surrender to the feeling. He meets David for a few last hard thrusts, back and forth, and then he’s coming, like light spilling into a room, coming and coming around David’s cock and into David’s frantic, jacking fist, his orgasm everywhere at once.

“Patrick, Patrick, fuck, you’re so good, you’re so good,” David is saying above him. “Fuck, God, you’re so—oh, oh,” and his fingertips are gripping Patrick’s hips and his teeth are biting into Patrick’s shoulder before Patrick can get his arms to move. He manages it eventually, though, petting David’s hair through the end of his orgasm.

David’s hair is gonna be wrecked, he thinks, distantly, and giggles.

“Feeling good, huh,” David pants, into his shoulder. Patrick keeps petting his hair.

“Really really good,” Patrick replies, though his ass is starting to feel . . . weird, too full, a little raw. “Can you, uh.”

“Yeah,” David says, and pulls out slowly. Patrick winces a little. “It can make you kind of, uh. Sensitive.”

“Mm-hm,” Patrick agrees. He lets his ass fall back on the bed as David gets up to toss the condom, then comes back with a washcloth.

“You’re really—wow, you’re really covered in come,” David laughs, flopping down on the bed next to him. “You’re lucky you don’t have much chest hair.” He cleans Patrick up, carefully, thoroughly, the same way he drives a car.

“It means you miss out on this kind of magnificent pelt,” Patrick jokes, running a hand over David’s chest. David squirms away.

“Stop,” he says. “It’s not cute.”

“I think it is,” Patrick says, lifting up and rolling on top of David. “I think it’s so cute.” He rubs his face down into David’s chest hair, and David squirms and laughs underneath him.

“Oh my God, you’re so gross,” David says, eventually, holding him by the shoulders.

“I like it,” Patrick says, honest, breathless, meeting David’s eyes.


Patrick lets himself fall against him, feeling for the first time David’s naked body at rest, in lassitude, feeling the sweaty warmth shared between them. “You’re comfy,” he says.

“No one has ever thought that,” David says, as if that’s evidence for anything. Patrick kisses his jaw sloppily.

“No one but me has ever gotten the full David Rose experience, then,” he says, sighing. His eyes want to close. He lets them.

“Guess not,” David says, after a long pause.

There’s quiet then, for a long time, and Patrick’s almost drifting off when David speaks again.

“Are you falling asleep?”

“No,” Patrick says, mostly asleep, ready to let unconsciousness claim him.
“Ugh. Come here.” David pushes him off, onto his side, then pulls the covers up over them both.

Chapter End Notes

**The First Thin Ice**, by Raymond Souster

Tonight
our love-making

ducks
walking warily
on the first thin ice
of winter.

[additional support for this chapter also provided by the following poem:]

**Night on the Uplands**, by Raymond Souster

A fire on such a warm night?
Crazy, wasn’t it, but then

The mosquitos wanted our flesh as much
As we wanted each other!

And as I remember
Won out in the end.
suddenly become unique

Chapter Notes

This chapter has some toxic masculinity going on in it, is perhaps the best way to warn for it. Ping me if you want spoilery details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They wake up early in the morning and fuck again; or, Patrick wakes up early in the morning, and kisses David on the back of the neck, softly and gently and with absolutely no intention of waking him up, until he finally wakes up and gets on board. Patrick gives David an entire blowjob this time, relying more on determination than any real knowledge of what he’s doing, coughing his way off David’s dick a couple times, but clearly good enough, judging from the noises David makes, from David’s soft, accepting way of carding his fingers through Patrick’s hair. David smiles at him after, eyes warm and shy, and kisses him, and then rolls him over and proceeds to destroy him. He sucks his nipples, and rubs his perineum, and gives him a handjob so masterful that Patrick, once he gets over his intense and frankly astonishing orgasm, wants to see it diagrammed. They do it all sleep-heavy and desperate, saying ridiculous things to each other in the heat of it, and afterwards Patrick is pretty sure his limbs don’t work anymore as he tries and fails to rub stinging sweat out of his eye.

The sun’s up, shining in through Stevie’s window.

“We should shower,” Patrick says, with a nagging sense of obligation. He feels pretty gross; he really should’ve showered last night instead of passing out. And unfortunately, they have to open the store today. “It’s already—” he glances over at the digital clock, which reads, for some bizarre reason Patrick can’t parse initially, 8:38. “Holy fuck we have to go.”

He never sleeps past six thirty in the summer; it doesn’t happen. Did he sleep in? Or, did they fuck for two hours? How could sex have possibly taken that long?

“What? No,” David says, brow furrowing in a way that Patrick would find really adorable if Stevie hadn’t told them to be out by eight and if they didn’t have to open the store at nine.

“Get up,” Patrick says, poking him, and laughing, because it’s so ridiculous, then poking him again, because it’s so serious. “Get up unless you want Stevie walking in on you naked.”

That gets David moving fast. They hastily throw on the same clothes from the day before, pack up the candles and assorted lubes, and cram Stevie’s sheets into the washing machine, then make a run for the door. Their timing is perfect to run into Stevie and Jake coming up the stairs as Patrick and David go down them. Patrick tries not to look, but Jake has a mosquito bite on his face and Stevie has a leaf in her hair and it’s the most awkward quadruple walk of shame he could possibly imagine, edging past each other in the narrow stairwell.

“I said eight o’clock,” Stevie hisses, mostly to Patrick.

“Sorry!” Patrick says, a bunch of times, some of them loud enough to be heard. He thinks David says it, too.

“We have to find somewhere else to do that,” Patrick mutters, as they shuffle quickly to his car. His
ass kind of hurts. And feels . . . wet. He would really like to shower.

“I am in wild agreement,” David grimaces.

Patrick holds his hand while he speeds them to the motel. David rubs his thumb over his knuckles and smiles at him, sidelong, when he thinks Patrick’s looking at the road. Patrick should be looking at the road. He smiles at David sidelong instead.

“One hour,” he says, darkly, when he pulls up outside David’s room. “Or I break up with you.”

“Asking a lot for this early in the relationship,” David says, but kisses him softly, sweetly, mouth open and yielding. Patrick holds him by the back of his head, just for a few seconds, then gives him a little tug to pull him off. He has morning breath; his hair is wrecked; his mouth is open and wet from their kiss; Patrick loves it.

David leans back in to kiss him again. Patrick tugs on his hair again, harder, pulling him back.

“Go,” he says, seriously.

“Pulling my hair is not the way to get me to leave,” David protests, but he gets out of the car, grinning. Patrick allows himself five seconds, to duck his head and hold on to the steering wheel and laugh silently out of pure joy, before he drives away.

He gets the store open at exactly 9:02, which could be worse. David gets there fifty-eight minutes later, looking as coiffed and put-together as ever.

“There he is,” David says, and hauls him in by the collar and kisses him hard, even though there’s a customer at the back of the store. “You brushed your teeth?”

“took a store toothbrush and paste,” Patrick admits. “You kissed me thinking I hadn’t?”

“You have one hour,” David says. Patrick grins and gets going.

* *

When he gets back, David asks him, coy and anxious, what he’s doing tonight.

“Funnily enough,” Patrick says slowly. “There’s a thing. Did you know that Ronnie and Ray and Twyla and all run an LGBTQ2AI-plus night?”

“Twyla?” David blinks.

“Yeah,” Patrick says. “I’m not sure what letter she falls under, actually.”

David narrows his eyes for a second, then shakes his head. “All those letters and they can’t include a P,” he says, disgruntled. “Or tell me about it, apparently. No, I did not know about this.”

“Did you want to come?”

“What, tonight?”

“Tonight is when it is. It’s the third Saturday of every month.” He explains the informal nature, the questions-out-of-a-hat thing, the drinks and the potlucks, watching David’s eyes glaze over.

“. . . and so I’m guessing that you don’t actually want to come,” Patrick finishes. He wishes he could say it differently—he doesn’t think he described it right, like he really captured what’s great about it.
He can’t think of how to say it, though.

“I mean, if you had found, like, a cute art exhibit about lesbian sex, or maybe some kind of queer audio tour . . .?”

“Check,” Patrick says. He feels defensive, a little irritated.

“I’m . . . very glad you enjoy it, though,” David says. “Um. You should go.”

“I am going to go,” Patrick says. “I know it’s bad timing, given that we just—just had that night, together, but it’s important to me.”

“Then go,” David says, rolling his eyes back. “I wouldn’t stop you from going.”

“Good,” Patrick says. His skin feels hot. “Are we fighting?”

David leans on the counter and drops his head down onto his folded arms. “Oh my god can we just say we’re not? I’m so tired, I can’t believe you got me up that early to suck my cock.”

The bell rings over the door. Patrick tries not to smile.

“You’re dating a morning person now,” he whispers, and David groans while Patrick goes to help the customer.

*

The shindig is being held a little ways out of town, down some unmarked road Patrick hasn’t taken before but that all the locals seem to know. He gets lost twice on the way, and has to text Ronnie for help. He considers just turning around, finding David, and corralling him back to Ray’s to fuck some more—if Ray’s at the shindig, he’s not at home, and it’s a rare opportunity—but Patrick can’t quite bear the thought of going weeks and weeks without another LGBTQ2AI-plus night. He sees a bunch of the people from it fairly regularly, Ray and Ronnie and Twyla and Jeff, but there’s something different about being in a crowd, about feeling understood by a whole room.

He wants that feeling. But he also wants the feeling of being near David, of holding his hand or kissing him on the cheek. He thinks about that, about kissing David on the cheek at one of these shindigs, about everyone there seeing them do that.

You’re still welcome if you want to come, he texts David, after he pulls in to what must be the place, given the cars outside.

After a moment, David texts him back: I’m good. You have fun.

It turns out the house belongs to someone named Denise who Patrick remembers vaguely from the barbecue at Twyla’s. It’s a warm-looking bungalow, standing tall against the flat countryside, its nearest neighbours at least a mile away. Once he gets there, Patrick doesn’t immediately see anyone he knows, so he introduces himself to a few new people and has conversations about how hard it was to get here.

“Patrick!” he hears, while in the middle of a discussion about municipal road maintenance in which none of the participants, including Patrick, know anything about municipal road maintenance. He turns around to greet Ronnie.

Ronnie looks him up and down in her usual unimpressed way. “I talked to Alice. She told me you met with her and that you were, quote, extremely competent.” She somehow makes this sound
“Thanks?” Patrick says. “I think we can cut the timeline on figuring out all her paperwork. Get it done sooner.”


“Sure,” Patrick says. Ronnie leads him to the kitchen, which is good because the layout of the house is kind of strange and Patrick wouldn’t have found it on his own. They’re joined by Jeff, who clasps Patrick’s shoulder in a warm hello.

“So is he gonna do it?” Jeff asks Ronnie. Patrick looks between them, intrigued.

“I haven’t even gotten him a beer yet, Jeff, give it a minute,” Ronnie replies. She hands Patrick a beer from the fridge. It’s the kind he usually drinks at the café with the team after a game. He raises an eyebrow.

“Okay, what’s the favour this time?” he asks.

“More of an opportunity,” Ronnie corrects him. She looks around, like she’s worried undercover agents will overhear her, and then says, “We’re thinking of staging a coup.”

“Of . . . the town?”

“Of the Café Tropical baseball team,” Jeff hisses, kind of louder than his normal speaking voice.

“Okay,” Patrick says. “Because we didn’t win by enough runs last time?”

“C’mon, rookie, you know that game was boring as hell,” Ronnie says. “We need to oust Jack as team captain and install someone competent.”

“So you’re planning to take over the rival team to make it . . . better,” Patrick says, slowly.

“It’s embarrassing,” Jeff says. “Someone needs to fix it, and it’s not gonna be Jack. He doesn’t listen to any of us.”

Patrick snorts. “From what you all have said, the team’s been mismanaged for a long time now,” he says. “It’d take a hell of a lot of work to turn them around and make them competitive. I think Jeff’s the best player who hasn’t left the team.”

“Sad, considering my sun allergy and inability to run,” Jeff agrees.

“So who’s the sucker you plan to install in this puppet regime?” Patrick asks.

Ronnie smiles.

* 

Denise turns out to be the short, effusive Indigenous woman Patrick met briefly at Twyla’s. Patrick seems to recall that she has a couple grown-up kids and a seed catalogue business; she’s generally one of the older people at the shindigs. When it comes time to pull a topic out of the hat, she stands on a chair, which gives her enough extra height to be just slightly above everyone else’s heads, and begins by thanking them all for joining her and her husband out in the middle of nowhere.

“We appreciate it and as always, there are plenty of guest rooms upstairs if folks don’t feel safe to drive.”
She moves on pretty quickly to the hat, which makes everyone cheer. She doesn’t draw the process out like Ronnie did, just grabs up the first paper that comes to her hand and reads it out.

“Romantic moments! Any objections?”

“Doesn’t necessarily work for everyone,” Alice says.

“When do they ever?” Twyla asks.

“Okay, let’s do it, then!” Denise hops down off the chair.

Patrick doesn’t think he’ll contribute; all of his romantic moments from his previous life now seem, in retrospect, painful and manufactured, and while he’s had a few small ones with David, they’re too new and too private for him to feel comfortable talking about them yet.

Ronnie tells a story, the first one he’s heard her tell at these events, about how she and Karen both tried to propose to each other on the same fancy cruise ship vacation; it’s like one of the romcoms that David and Ray like, it’s so sweet, and Patrick’s heart feels good watching Karen beam at her wife while she tells the story. Denise tells one about a previous girlfriend—with profuse apologies to her husband, who humphs performatively to the crowd—who persistently managed to surprise her with gifts and foods she was allergic to, but always very sweetly took her to the emergency room afterwards.

“It was romantic!” She insists, in her own defense, as the crowd laughs. “She couldn’t know I was also allergic to strawberries, and she stayed up all night and read me stories while the epi-pen wore off.”

There are a few more—Jeff tells the same story he told Patrick, about how he and Emily got together, and Twyla tells a story about an ex-boyfriend and a flower shop that’s so weird and unbelievable that Patrick wishes David were here; it’s exactly like those interminable Canadian-gothic magical realism novels he reads.

The big group chat quickly breaks into smaller groups, almost by necessity, since the house is large but labyrinthine, full of small rooms connected by small doors. It encourages intimate little conversations, and Patrick walks past a lot of quiet, thoughtful enclaves. He finds Alice chatting with Ben in a little nook under the stairs, sitting on cushions.

“Patrick! Come join us,” Alice says. “Do you know Ben?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, grinning. “Hi.” He shakes Ben’s hand. He’s still really handsome, all that dark hair and those deep brown eyes. Patrick wonders, with a shock, if he has a type.

“Nice to see you.”

“I was just telling Ben about the meteor shower. Did you end up taking your boyfriend?”

“Yeah, thanks for that, by the way, we got eaten alive by mosquitos.”

Alice hisses in sympathy. “Too bad.”

“It was romantic while it lasted, though,” Patrick admits.

“I didn’t know you had a boyfriend,” Ben says.

“Um,” Patrick says. “It’s kind of new. We’re just, uh, casual. So far.” Patrick doesn’t feel casual
about it, not at all, but if he’s going to ever bring David to one of these he’s gonna need people not to say boyfriend quite so much.

“Oh, check,” Ben says. “Is he here?”

Patrick shakes his head. “He . . . is not.”

“Not ready to meet the family yet, huh,” Alice smiles.

“I—no,” Patrick stutters. “I didn’t—is that what it is?”

Ben shrugs. “For some people. More important than meeting the bio fam.”

Patrick tries to imagine David meeting his parents, his cousins. David doesn’t act straight at all. There’d be no hiding it, not even on the phone. He licks his lips. “Well, maybe next time. What about Steven? Is he here?”

“Around somewhere,” Ben says. “Hard to keep track of anyone in this house.”

“It’s clearly got a bunch of portals to alternate dimensions if you go around the right corner at the right time,” Alice agrees. “But I think I’m going to go find my girlfriend before she falls into one.” She stands up, as much as she can with the stairs above them, and brushes her hands on her thighs, smoothing down her skirt.

“Can I come meet her?” Patrick asks. “Assuming she’s not already in Wonderland.”

“I’d like that,” Alice says, and takes Patrick’s arm. It’s an odd kind of touch, old-fashioned, something he’s only done with girls he’s dating, and not that often. It makes him feel gentlemanly. Trusted.

“That’s who I’m named after, actually,” Alice says, softly. “Alice in Wonderland.”

Patrick looks up at her, at her quiet smile, feeling like he’s being given a gift. “That’s really cool. Might be asking for trouble, though.”

“Life’s an adventure,” Alice says, firmly.

They walk together around the rooms, saying hi to various people, Alice asking after Hannah. They finally find her in a bizarre tiny room off the center hallways, sitting on a beanbag chair and talking with someone Patrick doesn’t know.

Alice doesn’t let go of his arm while she introduces him.

The night wears on in quiet, intimate conversations. Patrick mostly listens, and it’s just what he needed, after his wild night and hectic morning, to sit in this space and hear stories, to have time with his thoughts without having to be alone with them.

He’s never felt so good about having had sex, before. He’s still thrumming softly with it, his body still energized from what he and David did together. Lots of people in their little groups are following the brief from the hat and telling romantic stories, and if Patrick were going to tell one, it’d be this, the way that sex with David makes him feel new, and open, and more himself.

Eventually, Patrick runs into Ray and Joon-ho, who he didn’t even notice when everyone was crowded into the tiny living room.

“Hey, Patrick,” Joon-ho says, warmly, giving Patrick a hug. “Didn’t hear any beautiful romantic
stories from you this evening.”

“I’m surprised Ray didn’t have any to tell,” Patrick counters, dodging the question. “He’s the romantic.”

“Ah, Patrick, I think you have a streak of that, too,” Ray says, waggling his finger. “Aren’t you the big Meg Ryan fan?”


“Sandra Bullock?”

“That’s David.”

“Oh, how is David?”

“Yeah,” Joon-ho adds, grinning. “How is David?”

“David’s . . . very good. I think. We’re both very, very good. Thank you, Joon-ho.” He tries not to smile too much, but it’s nice for someone else to see that he’s happy, and know why.

“I’m so glad to hear that,” Joon-ho says. “He couldn’t make it here tonight? Too tired?”

Patrick gives in and laughs. “You don’t have to worry,” he says, allowing himself an eyebrow waggle to cover for his blush, “he’s got plenty of energy.”

“Gotcha,” Joon-ho says, chuckling.

“Is this some kind of innuendo?” Ray asks, which makes both of them laugh harder. “Patrick, if you’ve reached the public innuendo stage of your relationship with David, then let me be the first to say congratulations.”

“Thank you, Ray. I’m still waiting on those balloons,” Patrick says.

Joon-ho looks around. “Seriously, though, is David here? I’ve only met him the once.”

“It’s not really his scene,” Patrick says.

“Perhaps he thinks he’s too cool for us,” Ray says, knowingly.

Even though this is probably technically correct, Patrick shakes his head. He’s not sure why David didn’t want to come, not entirely, but he thinks he can guess at part of it, at least. “I think he’s just allergic to groups of more than six people,” he says.

“Well, he should get over it,” Joon-ho says. “He’s missing out.”

As he chats with them, and thanks Denise for the use of her space, and gets into a spirited game of Crazy Eights with Steven, and promises Ronnie that he’ll consider her offer to install him as leader of the rival baseball team, Patrick wonders if that’s the case, if David’s missing out, if he’d benefit from coming along. Patrick loves it here, but God knows he and David are different in a lot of ways.

He just wishes he could share this with David, too, this feeling of community, the way he and David have shared so many other things.

*
Before he crawls into bed that night, he checks his phone; sure enough, he has a bunch of texts from David that he missed while he was at the shindig.

**David:** Hope you’re having fun

**David:** That came out ironic in text but I meant it sincerely, I sincerely hope that you are having a fun time

**David:** Okay trying to fix irony just makes it worse

**David:** There is little fun here alas

**David:** I’m trapped in the motel with my family and my mother is trying to make me care about something to do with asbestos

**David:** So I guess I’m texting you, even though I know you are busy, to remind myself that there’s a whole world out there that doesn’t care about asbestos

**David:** or like, cares a normal amount

**David:** I’m not PRO lung cancer

**David:** Anyway okay. Ciao

Patrick laughs and laughs at that last one, imagining David’s face getting increasingly horrified as he looks at his own texts. He texts back:

**Patrick:** I had lots of fun, thank you. All the other queer people in town say hi.

**Patrick:** They wanted to know why I was unaccompanied, it was like a Jane Austen situation

**Patrick:** I’m sorry that your life is suddenly so much about asbestos for some reason

**Patrick:** And that it’s already given you the asbestos madness

His mom texted him, too, a picture of the foster-cat they’ve just brought home. It’s orange. He struggles to think of something to say to her, something to tell her. *I had sex with the guy I’m seeing, and it was amazing, and I got fucked up the ass for the first time* is what’s singing in his heart and his head, the most relevant news in his life at the moment.

While he shakes his head at the image of his mom going pale and silent, receiving such a text, a quiet part of him imagines sending her the G-rated version: a picture of him and David together; a story about David in which he calls him his boyfriend, just casually; an announcement: I’m seeing this guy and I’m really happy. I’m gay and I’m seeing someone and I’m happy. Mom, I’m gay, it’s a good thing that I’m gay, and by the way I’m dating my business partner, which is also a good thing.

But he hasn’t even heard David call them *boyfriends* yet, and it’s way too soon to make announcements. David could get tired of him, and it could all end at any moment.

And the quiet part of him wonders if his mom would go pale and silent at the G-rated ones, too.

In the end, he texts back that the cat is cute and he hopes it’s not destroying their furniture like the last one.

Even though it’s late, David replies to his texts a few minutes later.

**David:** I will be happy to accompany you anywhere you like tomorrow

**David:** and protect your reputation

**Patrick:** good

**Patrick:** for the sake of propriety

He supposes they could go on a date, tomorrow, go for dinner or a movie, get a drink. But all Patrick can think about is having sex again, feeling again the way he felt with David inside him, or on top of
him, or beneath him. He jerks off, thinking about it, one hand on his phone, looking at David’s texts about asbestos: he jerks off thinking about David being awkward, and sweet, and interested.

*  

David kisses him when he gets to the store the next morning, deeper and dirtier than is really warranted in a place of business during working hours, but Patrick can’t seem to care that much. There’s no one in the store at the moment, anyway.

“Missed you too,” Patrick says, when David finally takes his tongue out of his mouth.

“You were the one who had a thing last night,” David smiles. “How are you feeling?”

Patrick cocks his head. “Is that another way of asking me if I have regrets?”

David does his little grimace that he clearly thinks is cute and endearing and which is, in fact, cute and endearing. It’s infuriating. “Maybe?”

“I can’t wait to do it again,” Patrick breathes, kissing him again, with a little more we’re-in-a-public-place vibe this time.


“What about you?”

“What about me, what?”

“Do you have any regrets?”

“Hmm.” David pretends to think. “I think I regret the part where you fell asleep before I could try to get you hard a third time.”

“That was unlikely to happen after what you did to me.” Patrick takes David’s hand, rubbing a thumb over his knuckles. It’s better than fidgeting with his own hands, and has the side benefit of distracting David from noticing how nervous he gets when they talk about this stuff.

“Oh? What did I do to you?” David asks, bright and chipper. Patrick bends his head to kiss David’s hand.

“Fucked me senseless,” Patrick murmurs, knowing that the blush he’ll get from saying it will be worth it for the shocked look in David’s eyes. He looks up; it is.

“Well,” David says. “Aren’t you coming along with your dirty talk in inappropriate places, then.”

“Trying to keep up, since you once, not that long ago in fact, tried to talk me off in the stockroom during business hours,” Patrick grins. David withdraws his hand from Patrick’s grip and huffs.

“Well, it kind of worked on you anyway, so I think what we should be focusing on is my ability to talk you off and not necessarily the time or location when I used that ability.”

“Speaking of times and locations,” Patrick says, “will the asbestos thing have any chance of clearing your family out of the motel?”

“Only at times when I will also be cleared out of the motel, alas,” David says. “Why? Did you have plans?”
Patrick does; now that he’s had sex with David, he wants to do it again and again. It’s astonishing to him that they’re not having sex right now, all day long, when they have the capacity to make each other feel that way. He’s not turned on right this second, but he’s antsy, has been antsy for the last day and a half, wanting to pin David up against any convenient flat or flat-ish surface and take him again. He’s a dam, bursting, and all that energy has nowhere to go.

“Nothing in particular,” he says. “Just thought you might like to join me for an evening somewhere more private than a store with floor to ceiling front windows.”

“Mmm, I thought privacy was our problem before,” David says.

“Yeah, but now I know what I’m missing, I’m really motivated to fix the problem,” Patrick says. David kind of squawks in protest at that, and Patrick grins.

“All right, fine,” David says, eventually, with an imperious wave of his hand. “I’m glad you will soon solve this problem, then.”

“I will,” Patrick says, all confidence, with absolutely no idea how he’s going to do that. He thinks through their options again, and this time he finds he’s a little less hung up on the idea of other people knowing what he wants the space for, or of awkward conversations. He could put up with a lot of awkwardness, he thinks, for more alone time with David.

Later, when David’s off getting them lunch, he texts Joon-ho: *Think you and Ray could clear out and give me the house tonight?*

Joon-ho texts back a line of eggplant emojis, which makes Patrick annoyed, embarrassed, and amused in almost identically equal measure. As he’s deciding what to say, Joon-ho texts again.

**Joon-ho:** Sorry, I’m kidding, yes of course you can have the house for a date night. I’ll keep Ray in Elmdale till tomorrow.

**Patrick:** OK thanks.

**Joon-ho:** Seriously, sorry, didn’t mean to be a [eggplant emoji]

Patrick snickers, the sound breaking out of him suddenly.

**Patrick:** Turns out I like having a little more [eggplant emoji] in my life

**Joon-ho:** !!!

When David gets back with his BLT, Patrick presses up along him, putting their bodies together, and looks down at his mouth for a long moment before he kisses it.

“Um,” David says, breathless, when Patrick pulls back and releases him. “I got you a sandwich?”

“I got us a place for tonight,” Patrick says.

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Patrick tries to pretend like they’re gonna watch a movie and eat a frozen pizza first, but David drops his stuff and starts kissing him before they’re even in the door, biting at his lip, rough and hard, and it erodes what little pretense he had left. Instead of drawing it out, or teasing. Patrick kicks the door closed behind them and kisses back just as eagerly, hands on David’s waist. He walks David backwards into the kitchen, gets his hands under his thighs, and lifts him up bodily onto the counter.

“You’re hot,” Patrick replies, and kisses him again. They end up fucking right there, hard and fast, David’s head colliding painfully with the cupboard at least once, Patrick trying to crawl up over him and not quite succeeding, both of them sloppy and handsy and wild, until they give up and half-fall down to the floor instead, rutting against one another, mouths and hands everywhere, clothes just barely out of the way. Patrick comes in David’s hand and David comes against Patrick’s thigh and both of them are sweaty and spent, sticking somewhat to the tile.

“Can’t believe we didn’t make it to the couch,” David groans.

“Let alone up to the bed,” Patrick agrees, but he’s smiling, can’t stop smiling, and he can’t stop kissing David, either.

“I’m too old for floor sex,” David complains.

“How old is that?” Patrick asks, which shuts him up. Too old or not, David kisses him for a while before he makes them get up.

They do watch half a movie—David’s carefully curated choice, made after about twenty minutes of agonizing indecision, of *10 Things I Hate About You*—and eat most of the frozen pizza before Patrick’s between David’s legs again, kissing his thighs, sucking bruises onto his hips, licking down behind his balls, tentative, hungry. They make it up to Patrick’s bed this time, Patrick distracting David from the weird tchotchkes and floral wallpaper by tugging on his hair and mouthing at his collarbone.


“Anything,” David says, closing his eyes as Patrick tugs on his hair again, and again. He really does like it. “Whatever you want.”

“I—can you—” he swallows. He wants everything. He lets his grip soften, letting go of David’s hair. “Help me out, here.”

David opens his eyes, taking in Patrick’s face, and nods, then bites his lip.

“You wanna try fucking me?” David asks him, softly. “Because I really want you inside me.”

“Yeah?” Patrick’s mind nearly whites out at the idea.

“Yeah. I was a little jealous of you the other night.”

“Oh, what, because you couldn’t fuck yourself?” Patrick kisses his throat, smiling against the skin.

“Mmm, can if you like, but I’d prefer it with your direct participation.”

“Um,” Patrick says, imagining what that might entail. David fucking himself while Patrick’s in the room. Does he mean, with his fingers? With . . . toys? The images are really hot. “I—uh.”

“Or we can wait on that, maybe,” David adds, hastily, closing his eyes tight. “Don’t—don’t listen to me.”

Patrick remembers what he said, about not being good at making choices during sex. It’s something they’ll have to help each other with, he thinks, something they’ll both have to be careful of.

“I want to listen to you,” Patrick says, trying for the right words. “I want you to—tell me. What you
want.”

Under him, David takes a shuddering breath, then opens his eyes again. “I thought. If you wanted to try it the other way. I’d like that.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, softly.

So that’s what they do; Patrick tries not to let his hands shake while he works David open, tries not to come before he even gets inside. It’s intimate, differently intimate than the other way around, with Patrick sinking slowly into David’s ass, kissing the back of his neck so softly, David braced on his hands on the bed and making quiet little ah-ah-ah sounds that drive Patrick wild. It takes a while, with little stops and starts.

“You sure—is this—”


Patrick gives him a second, then when David tells him, he starts again, frowning in concentration, wanting to get it right.

Once he’s inside, Patrick feels his body shudder and it’s like he hits a weird plateau, in love with the gorgeous feel of David under him, around him, but not desperate to come like he felt before they started. They fuck for a while, pushing and rocking against each other, rolling pleasure building between them.

“Can you—” Patrick says, panting into David’s shoulder.

“What,” David says.

“Can you spread your legs more?” Patrick says. “Maybe—move your—your knees—”

“Yeah,” David says, and moves the way Patrick wants him to, takes him just a little deeper, and they both groan with the shift in position that brings them into closer contact. Patrick changes the easy rocking into proper fucking, in and out slowly, gently.

“That okay?” Patrick asks, when David’s been quiet a while. “You like that?”

“Yeah, yeah,” David says. He was so vocal, when he was doing this to Patrick, but now he’s . . . not.

“David. Talk to me.”

David lets out a long, low groan. “S’good,” he manages. “I just—oh, fuck.”

Patrick rocks in and out of him, hands gripping his hips. “You just what,” he gets out.

David pushes back against him, hard, slapping their bodies together, and then he says, “Do me harder.”

Patrick catches his breath, and braces, and fucks him harder. As he speeds up, he works more of those groans out of him, and then suddenly David’s squirming underneath him, fists clenching in the sheets, chest heaving with his breath. It makes Patrick feel amazing, powerful, that he can do this to David with just his body.

“Please, please, please,” David says, voice breaking the silence, and Patrick grabs ahold of David’s shoulder with one hand and his hip with the other and fucks him hard.
With the noises David’s making and the soft, tight clench of his ass around Patrick’s cock and the restless shift of his hips, Patrick finds himself coming long before he wants to, overwhelmed by how much David wants it, how hard he wants it, how beautifully he takes it. Patrick comes without even knowing he’s about to come, white-hot rush overtaking him suddenly.

“Sorry,” he gasps, immediately after. “Fuck. Sorry.” He’s a little angry with himself; he wanted to make this good for David, make it last. His spent cock is softening, slipping out of David’s ass.

David reaches back and catches his wrist.

“Patrick. Don’t apologize. Just. Put something else in me. Please.” His eyes are squeezed closed and Patrick thinks he could come again just thinking about how much David needs it, how David just begged for it. He flips David over and does what he says, four fingers pressed inside, making him moan and grind down against Patrick’s knuckles just like he did against Patrick’s cock.

“You’re so stretched around me,” Patrick says, voice low, full of wonder. “You really could take my whole fist, couldn’t you?”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck, Patrick, yes,” David groans.

Patrick doesn’t put his whole fist inside him, but he puts his mouth on his cock, licking and sucking till his thighs tremble and his hips twitch and he comes, spilling all over Patrick’s lips and down his chin.

“Gross,” Patrick says, come dribbling from his mouth, thick and viscous. David presses his hands to his face and laughs and laughs, from his belly, like Patrick’s never seen him do before, and it’s so beautiful that Patrick has to wipe his mouth on his bare arm and laugh, too.

They take a shower together, squeezed together in Ray’s little avocado-coloured bathtub, skin to skin, enjoying the hot spray of water and the slide of soap.

“I want to suck you again,” Patrick says, hands on David’s hips, his thighs, his belly, restless.

“I’m, uh. Not gonna get it up again anytime soon,” David says, brow furrowed.

Patrick nods. He wants it, so badly. He can’t even articulate why. He wants it even more, thinking about David’s cock staying soft. “Can I, though? Do you mind?”

“No, I— I don’t mind,” David says, and his hands fall onto Patrick’s shoulders as he gets carefully to his knees.

He blinks rivulets of water out of his eyes as he looks up, and takes David’s soft cock in his mouth reverently, loving the feel of it, loving David’s wet gasps and David’s hands rubbing his shoulders, squeezing tight. He kisses and sucks as gently as he knows how, thinking about how sensitive David must be, how strange this must feel. Patrick learns the weight and shape of David when he’s soft, the taste of him in the water, and he thinks he could do it forever. He does it until David’s hands on his arms urge him up again, until they’re mouth to mouth again, kissing deep and desperate, until the cold water drives them out.

“Um. Thank you,” David says, voice husky, and kisses him again.


David has various skin care things to do after the shower; Patrick leaves him to it and gets into his pajama pants and t-shirt, but then finds himself wandering back into the bathroom to watch. David’s
wearing sweats but no shirt, drops of water still clinging here and there to his skin, applying his own under-eye serum this time.

“Um, can I help you?” David asks.

Patrick doesn’t want to say *I missed you* when he was twenty feet away for five minutes.

“I thought I’d witness the miraculous transformation process,” he says, instead. Then, tentatively, he wraps his arms around David’s bare waist and kisses below his ear. He looks in the mirror, at his own face half-hidden behind David’s shoulder, at David’s small smile, at their bodies together. He wants to freeze this moment, keep it to look at again and again.

David must have the same idea, because he picks up his phone from the bathroom counter and thumbs quickly to his camera app, snapping a photo.

“Will you send that to me?” Patrick asks. In the mirror, David’s smile gets softer.

“Mmm. Yes, but only if you swear to treat it as strictly classified. No sharing or posting. No one needs to see this much of my body.”

“I do,” Patrick says, nuzzling in against the clean, sharp smell of David’s neck. He kisses him there, again and again, and hears the camera click a few more times.

“You should moisturize,” David says, when he puts the phone down again. Patrick looks up at him in the mirror.

“I should?”

David picks through the set of jars and vials and tubes in his kit, then pulls one out. “Here.”

“What, you don’t think I’m pretty?” Patrick’s joking, mostly, but David gives him a disbelieving eyebrow that makes him feel warm anyhow. He takes the bottle. He thinks it’s just lotion, but fancy.

“It’s okay to look after yourself, you know,” David says.

It’s not; Patrick’s taken lots of showers with lots of naked men before, where there were ass-slaps and towel-snaps and constant simulated assfucking, and applying lotion afterwards is exactly the kind of thing that wouldn’t have been okay. It’s stupid, but still engrained in him, things men do and things men don’t do. Things that make you gay.

“Plus it’ll make you soft. Touchable,” David adds, kissing his temple. Patrick figures that’s why it makes you gay.

“But David, what if my hands aren’t steady enough to apply it properly?”

David huffs out an annoyed breath. “C’mere.”

To Patrick’s surprise, he squirts out a glob of the lotion on the back of his own hand, below the knuckle of his index finger, above the pad of his thumb. Then he uses that like a paint palette, dabbing the lotion onto little spots on Patrick’s cheeks, his forehead. Patrick blinks, bemused; he doesn’t think anyone’s ever done such a thing for him before. David’s thumbs are steady and sure as they brush the skin of Patrick’s face, over and over.

“There,” David says, when he’s done spreading it over Patrick’s skin. “Gorgeous.”

“If you say so,” Patrick says, feeling something twist in his chest. David’s called him that before, and
he likes it, but it’s not—he doesn’t know how true it is, really.

“So, um.” David bites his lip, then picks up a short-sleeved black and white t-shirt from his bag, pulling it over his shoulders. Patrick watches his arms move, watches his lats ripple under his skin, watches him disappear under the fabric. “It’s late? And I can go back to the motel if you’re, uh. Tired.”

“I am tired,” Patrick says, watching David’s quick, accepting nod. “But you can stay, if you want to.” They slept together the other night, at Stevie’s, but that was different; they were both naked and exhausted in a borrowed bed, passing out after sex. “If, I mean, if you’re comfortable with that.”

“Well, I just don’t want to do anything you’re not comfortable with,” David says, gesturing in dizzying circles.

“Okay, David.” Patrick blows out a breath of air and crosses his arms. “Do you want to stay over?”

David squints. He opens his mouth, then closes it, then takes a breath. “Yes?”

“Good. I want you to stay over. So, stay over.”

“Okay,” David says, huskily. He walks over to Patrick, running his hands over Patrick’s shoulders lightly. Patrick realizes his arms are still crossed, and makes an effort to uncross them. David kisses him softly, and he forces himself to breathe normally again. “Um. Do you have a side of the bed?”

Patrick huffs a laugh. “I’ve been kind of . . . using the middle, for a while now. What about you?”

“I’ve been sleeping in a twin bed for a while now.”

“Right. So we’re both rusty.” That makes it a little better. When they get under the covers together, it doesn’t feel comfortable, or familiar, but it feels nice. Like something worth getting used to.

David seems equally unsure, and they shift and twist around each other for a few minutes, trying to get comfortable. Eventually, they end up with Patrick’s head on David’s shoulder, curled up around him. The position feels strangely feminine. Something else he’s not supposed to want, or like.

“You comfy?” David asks, softly.


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Patrick’s hard, and aching, and just about ready to wake David up so he can ask to squirm down under the sheets and give him head, when Ray walks in on them.

“Good morning, Patrick,” he says, as he comes through the door. “Oh, and David too!”

David blinks awake and groans. Patrick feels like he was caught in the middle of actual sex, even though they’re both fully dressed and the blankets are more than enough to cover for his . . . lascivious thoughts.

“Hi, Ray,” he says, through gritted teeth. “Can you maybe give us some privacy?”

Ray of course his way out of the room and David sits up, still blinking and confused. He looks at the door.

“Wait, was I dreaming, or was Ray just here?”
Patrick slides his hand up David’s thigh, because he’s still turned on and at least David’s awake now. “Ray is also a morning person,” he mutters, against David’s neck.

“And, what, that turns you on?”

“You turn me on,” Patrick says. His hand reaches David’s cock, which is half-hard through his sweatpants.

“Um, okay, but—” David glances at the door. “I thought we couldn’t, while Ray was home.”

Patrick lets out a long sigh and rests his chin on David’s shoulder. “We kind of can’t,” he agrees. He’s going to need to have some kind of talk with Ray.

“Then why is your hand still on my dick?”

“Your dick turns me on, too,” Patrick says, and is rewarded by a hot gleam of desire in David’s eyes. Under Patrick’s palm, he gets harder. This was on the list, feeling him get hard; it’s as good as he thought it would be. “Hang on,” Patrick says, feeling motivated. “Let me scout it out.”

He tiptoes to the door, trying not to think about his erection, how it feels as he walks, how it must look to David, under his pajamas. He peeks into the hallway and listens.

“Okay, Ray’s downstairs, come make a break for it with me,” Patrick hisses.

“I cannot believe you,” David says, but he’s grinning helplessly and rolling out of bed, letting Patrick shoo him down the hall and into the bathroom.

“This room has a door that locks,” Patrick explains, pushing David up against said door and locking it.

“It also has unfortunately good acoustics,” David points out.

Patrick leans back and turns the cold water tap in the tub on full blast. Wasteful, but he can’t bring himself to care. “David,” he says, gripping David’s t-shirt in his hands. “Let me suck you. Please.”

“I mean, sure, if you insist,” David says, on a breathy laugh, and Patrick kisses him hard and deep and slow before sinking to his knees on the bathmat. God, he loves doing this for David. And he loves how much he loves it, too, the pleasure feeding back on itself in a glorious loop. It feels good to feel good about sucking cock. He closes his eyes and takes him in.

From David’s reaction, he’s definitely getting better at it, which makes him feel a low, rolling satisfaction in his belly, and makes him redouble his efforts.

After David comes, Patrick spits into the sink, then turns around to find David’s hands on his shoulders, David spinning him to put him in the same position, back against the door, before sliding down to his knees between Patrick’s legs.

“You’re perfect. I can’t believe you exist,” David says. “Anyone ever deepthroat you before?”

Patrick shakes his head. “N—no,” he says.

David shows him. Patrick comes really, really hard, and just hopes that the sound of the water covers the shout that he muffles against his arm.

Later, Ray makes them eggs, and only winks at Patrick four or five times while they eat them. David doesn’t seem to notice; feeding him is a good way to get him past any social awkwardness, Patrick is
learning.

It’s a Monday, so they don’t have to go in to the store. Normally Patrick would read, plan out food for the week, do laundry, catch up on work for his remaining clients, maybe iron his shirts. He should do all those things, but he’s having trouble getting the motivation while David is still there with him, looking mussed and soft, still in his short-sleeved shirt.

“So what are your plans for today?” David asks, dabbing at his mouth with a paper napkin, after Ray leaves for an open house. Ray has to be at the open house all day.

He kind of wants to spend the day just staring at David’s arms.

“Nothing in particular,” Patrick says, pushing his chair back from the table. David stands and offers his hand, which Patrick takes. They hold hands all the way back upstairs, where David lays him down and does him slow, kissing him so softly and with such determination, all over his body, that Patrick feels like he’s turned on everywhere, that his skin and his thighs and his elbows are turned on, that his body is swelling and filling like his cock. David doesn’t even try to remove any of Patrick’s clothes at first, kissing around the edges of seams, pushing up his sleeve to kiss his bicep, and only slowly removing them one piece at a time as they start to get more in the way.

“What about this?” David asks. “Anyone ever taken their time with you before?” Patrick surges under him with sudden desire, just at the question, arching and taking a sharp, quick breath.

“What—I,” he says, and David smiles against his skin.

After that, the slow easy kissing and biting turns him on even more, that phrase rattling around his head, taken their time with you, like he’s a meal to be savoured, like David’s consuming him as he goes. The answer, which he doesn’t need to say because it’s obvious, obvious in his every reaction to what should be simple touching, is that no one has, because he never wanted anyone to. Getting the other person to orgasm and getting sex over with quickly was always the brief.

He shifts restlessly, turned on and uncomfortable with it, thinking about it, about David doing something to him that’s so far out of his control, making his body react so unpredictably. He tries to touch back, to get his hands on David’s sides, his arms, his thighs, but David shushes him and pushes him down.

“Lie back,” he says. Patrick gazes up at him, feeling wild, new emotions rushing through him.

“Are you sure,” Patrick asks, not really phrasing it like a question, just throwing out words to put a little space between himself and this kind of pleasure, this slow and deliberate pleasure, this pleasure where he can lie back and enjoy it, focus on it, feel it fully.

“Do you want it?” David asks. “Do you want it like this?” He’s in the process of finally, finally pulling off Patrick’s underwear, but then he comes back to Patrick’s knees, his thighs, sliding up his flanks and past his cock without touching it. “Can I do you like this?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, and swallows. “Yes.” The idea of it is terrifying and he wants it so badly he can taste it, like adrenaline at the back of his throat.

“Okay, then,” David says, quirking a pursed little smile before he kisses Patrick’s mouth. “Let’s take our time.”

For a while, a long while, a glorious while, they do, Patrick lets him: lets David kiss him and stroke him and cover him, like he’s something precious, like he matters enough to be given all of that. For a while, he lets himself feel it, what it’s like to be taken care of.
But eventually the feeling builds up in him, the antsy, restless feeling, and he has to move, has to brace his hands against David’s shoulders and flip them over, get back on top. It makes the anxious, warm, weird feeling in his belly dissipate a little. He misses it. He wants it back. It’s a relief for it to be gone. He wants to feel useful instead.

“This okay?” he asks, breathless. “I want to get you off.”

“Yeah,” David says, “Yeah, let’s.”

He slides his hand down into David’s pants.

“You’re hard,” he says, breathily, into David’s mouth. “You’re wet.”

“Yeah,” David agrees. “Watching you like this—it does a lot for me.”

“Watching me like what?” Patrick asks, fascinated. He jacks David slowly.

David frowns a little, like he’s not sure Patrick will like the answer. “You get . . . open. You’re usually, uh. Not.”

Patrick thinks that vulnerable is the word David’s talking around. It’s how he felt, giving David free rein over his body. “Oh,” he says. His mind races, playing back their conversation. “And that gets you hard, huh.” He gives David’s cock a twist and squeeze to emphasize his point.

“God, yes. It does. Patrick. You get me so hard.”

“Tell me what I should do to you,” Patrick says, and David groans, letting his forehead fall against Patrick’s.

“Tell me what you like to do to me,” he counters, after a few seconds. “Tell me what we’ve done that’s gotten you hot.”

Patrick swallows, hesitating, and David kisses him right where his lips pull in a tight line.

“Or show me,” David offers, instead. Patrick nods. That, he can do. He slides his hands down David’s chest, still in his t-shirt, then up under it. David moves with him to take it off, then Patrick bends his head and applies his mouth to David’s nipple, sucking and licking.

“Yeah,” David says, after a minute, arching against Patrick’s mouth. “You like that. You like sucking me.”

Patrick flutters his eyes closed. He does. He likes it.


Kissing his way down David’s chest, he shows him what else: shows him by licking and sucking on his balls, pressing a knuckle hard behind, using his hands and mouth on his cock, scraping fingernails against his thighs, biting against his abs, all of it, all of it, hands and mouth everywhere, greedy and eager.

“You like that,” David tells him, over and over, and Patrick moans, and shakes, and agrees: he likes it.

* 

They do eventually finish 10 Things I Hate About You, David’s head pillowed on Patrick’s chest,
moving with his breath.

“Why this movie?” Patrick asks, as the credits roll, running his fingertips over David’s exposed elbow. David leans back to eyeball him.

“Why not this movie? Julia Stiles, for a start, is radiant as a completely unbelievable teenager.”

“Heath Ledger is also kind of unconvincing as a teenager.”

“But similarly gorgeous and powerful, may he rest in queer heaven.”

Patrick smiles against David’s hair. “Was he queer? How do you get into queer heaven?”

“You start by having a mouth like that. And then singing your way through one of the most beautiful romantic gestures ever in film.”

“I did like the song part a lot,” Patrick admits. He thinks about how much David likes romcoms, how he likes movies about people being wildly, unstoppably, ridiculously vulnerable in love. That’s the grand gesture part of any romcom, really: someone being vulnerable, in public, in a way they can’t downplay or take back. No smart comments, no ironic distance, just pure self-exposure. It’s scary to actually imagine yourself in the Heath Ledger role, doing something bold and declarative like that in front of everyone. Patrick wasn’t even able to propose to Rachel in a restaurant.

He thinks about the story Ronnie told at the latest LGBTQ2AI-plus night, and about all the sweet, romantic stories he heard at Denise’s house, the quiet, intimate stories of being swept off your feet, serenaded, surprised, loved. He wants something like that, something David can tell people about, something public. He wants to give David something that will make him feel the way he feels for Heath Ledger and Julia Stiles, except for them instead.

*

The rest of the day flies by: lunch, and fucking, and a shower followed by an early ravenous dinner, and fucking, until they’re sneaking out of yet another house, kissing up against the back door and shushing each other, laughing, as Ray walks in the front.

Patrick drives David back to the motel, kissing him goodbye in the car.

“Don’t suppose you wanna park for a while,” Patrick murmurs, only half a joke. David laughs into his neck.

“Okay, I love this phase, I do, and I think it’s wonderful that you’re having a gay revelation, but I am honestly kind of chafed? At this point? The spirit is willing, but.”

They did have a lot of sex that day; Patrick smiles. “So you’re saying I fucked you raw,” he says, trying to sound sexy and missing the mark, but using it to skip right past the gay revelation part.

“Holy fuck,” David pronounces. “Who are you now? Where’s the sweet boy I was dating who needed to go slow?”

“I like fast now,” Patrick says, kissing his neck. David tilts his head back for it, for a minute, then comes back to himself and pushes Patrick off.

“Mmm. You are way too good at that.”

“I’ve been getting all this practice,” Patrick points out.
“Well, too much practice is unfortunately a little hard on the body, as it turns out, so. Let’s take a break, okay? And—and maybe, process, a little.”

This last so quiet that Patrick almost doesn’t hear it. It makes his stomach sink into a sudden pit. “Hey,” he says, “hey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to push you.” He bites his lip. He’s had sex plenty of times when he didn’t feel like it, just to make it easier for the other person. He never wants to put David in that position.

“You are fine,” David says, smiling at him. “You’re gorgeous, and a lot of fun in bed, and I loved our day off together, and I honestly wouldn’t trade the stubble burn on my thighs for anything. Like, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to get an erection again? But it was worth it.”

Patrick laughs, ducks his head. “Okay. I don’t want you to feel—it’s really not a checklist. I just want you so much.”

“Right,” David says, frowning. “Also kind of hard to deal with? Most people don’t. For that long. So. Take some time.”

“What, so I can stop wanting you so much?” It’s another half-joke, because David can’t really mean that, can he? Patrick can’t really imagine it. His ass hurts and his dick is sensitive and his left nipple, which got really enthusiastic attention from David earlier, is absurdly painful every time it brushes against his shirt, but he still wants to roll him into the backseat and rub their bodies together again; even if they can’t come, even if it hurts, he wants it again.

Unless David’s trying to push him away. Unless David doesn’t feel the same way Patrick does, swept up in this new thing they have together.

David purses his lips. “I mean. If it’s going to happen? I’d rather we not be . . . in too deep.”

It’s like a bucket of ice water; Patrick feels it like a shock to his system.

“Wow,” Patrick says. “Okay, so, is it that I want you too much or I don’t want you enough? Because I’m not sure what you’re asking me to do, here, but I get the sense that I’m getting it wrong.” It’s what he was afraid of, exactly the thing he was afraid of.

“I—Patrick. We’ve been dating two weeks.”

“Two and a half,” Patrick says, gripping the steering wheel and huffing out a breath. “We started on a Friday.”

David looks miserable, and isn’t making eye contact, but when he speaks his voice is matter-of-fact, like this doesn’t really matter to him. “And there are, you know, other queer men in the world. I’m not—it’s okay if you need to stop, or pull back.”

“So, you’re trying to get me to break up with you,” Patrick says. His stomach is clenching. He wants to be sick. How did this happen so fast? Weren’t they fine a minute ago? “Is that what—”

“No!” David interrupts, and at least there’s some emotion in his voice now. “That is not what I mean. I don’t want to break up! This is, this is the best thing I’ve ever—I don’t want to break up.”

This lets Patrick breathe a little. “Then, David, why are you—what are you saying, even.”

He grimaces, clearly unsure. “Just . . . just that if you end up breaking up with me . . . it’s not, um. Unexpected.”
Patrick’s heart tears into pieces, a little, at that, the idea that maybe David has been filled with the same fear that Patrick has. He tries to get himself together, to recognize that this isn’t really about him, but his thoughts are racing and his skin feels clammy and his stomach is still in knots.

“David,” he says, making his voice softer, hearing it shake. “What indication have I ever given you that I want to break up? Was it spending the whole day all over you?”

“Historically the indications haven’t always been very clear? But sometimes . . . yeah, sometimes it’s happened right after the intense sex phase. Once the novelty has worn off.” David’s looking down at his knees again.

“Okay.” He’s starting to see it, maybe, that David thinks he’s doing the right thing by telling Patrick all this. Patrick looks for the right words to say what he needs David to understand. “I don’t know what it was like with those other people, but I’m gonna need you to figure out that I’m not them. You’re not,” he pauses, clears his throat. “You’re not a novelty.”

He tries not to think about the fact that David has had the intense sex phase with plenty of other people, that it’s not as special to him as it is to Patrick.

David bites his lip. “Okay,” he says, softly. “So, to be clear, you’re not breaking up with me.”

“No! I’m—the opposite of that. I’m asking you to dinner on Wednesday.”

“Wednesday, specifically?”

“I already made a reservation at a place in Elmdale.”

“Okay,” David says. “I guess we’d better stay together, then.”

“Yes, I guess.”

David clears his throat, touches Patrick’s knee tentatively. “I’m the opposite of breaking up with you, too.”

“Well, thank God,” Patrick mutters. “I’m so goddamn confused.”

“Yes. Um. I do that to people sometimes,” David admits. “I’m sorry. I just—you’re probably processing a lot, now, too. I know you maybe feel . . . well, whatever, but if it does happen in the future, that I’m not the best choice for you, I don’t want you to feel obligation.”

That feels more personal, much more like it’s about Patrick. David doesn’t know about Rachel, but it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that someone who avoids coming out until his thirties might have a strong sense of obligation.

“I promise I don’t,” Patrick says, helplessly. “Can you accept, for now at least, that I just want to be with you? That you’re the best choice for me right now?”

David purses his lips doubtfully, and Patrick shakes his head in utter disbelief.

“I’ll try!” David says. “I promise I’ll try. This is—I know it means a lot to you. It means a lot to me, too. I’ve never. It means. A lot.”

I love you, Patrick finds himself wanting to say. The feeling of the words in his head shocks him; he’s never felt them this way before, living inside of him, wanting to be spoken.

Given the messed-up mix of emotions flying through the air between them, Patrick’s going to assume
that now isn’t the time to let them out. But God. They’re there. They’re there, already, and that is frightening. He’s ready to say *I love you* and David’s assuming they’re going to break up any minute.

He thinks about David asking him *has anyone ever deepthrottled you* and *has anyone ever taken their time with you*, like he wanted to make sure that Patrick got those experiences, that someone gave him those experiences. Like he was trying to make the most of the limited time he thought they’d have together, and all he wanted to do with that time was give Patrick good experiences. Patrick takes a deep, shuddering breath.

“Thank you,” he says, remembering the last time he said those words to David here in his car.

“Hey,” he says, and takes David’s hand. “We’re both trying something new, right?”

“Yeah,” David says, meeting Patrick’s eyes, his breath sighing out of him as he relaxes a little.

“Sorry I’m bad at it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Patrick says. “Just don’t break up with yourself without consulting me, okay?”

“I can *maybe* do that,” David says, smiling. He leans in for another kiss, this one soft, slow. Patrick meets him for it, tries to put everything he’s feeling into it. Those words echo through his head again, *I love you I love you I love you*, and he’s glad his mouth is too occupied to allow him to say them.

* * *

David’s words stick with him, though, planting a little seed of doubt: that maybe he is just falling in love with the first man he’s ever dated, that maybe he should branch out, or go slower. But the idea of actually doing that is deeply unappealing, and the idea of being with David, teasing David, watching movies with David, having increasingly amazing sex with David is . . . much more appealing.

Even if David does act like a forced choice between *Hope Floats* and *The Lake House* is the same thing as letting Patrick pick the movie.

Still, he takes the note and backs off a little bit, letting David be the one to initiate anything more intense than kissing or hand-touching. To his relief, David *does* initiate, sneaking him into the motel when the family’s out so they can finally try out that tiny twin bed, digging his hand into Patrick’s jeans in the backroom of the store after closing, coming over immediately when Patrick texts him that he has the house to himself. It’s all very high school, the sneaking around, except that, unlike Patrick’s actual high school experiences, it’s a lot of fun, giggling and trying to shush David’s giggling while they hold still and listen for a door to open. Patrick supposes he’s too old for floor sex, too, and sex against walls with shelving pushing into his back, and sex while trying to be quiet in case someone’s parents come home, but the thing is, he never did any of that when he was younger, never had any motivation to do it, so he’s determined to enjoy it now.

“How’s it going with David?” Ray asks, and Patrick doesn’t really have the words for it, for how he feels when David’s around, exasperated and dizzy and overwhelmed and happy, just so happy, so he ends up saying, “Good.” But there must be something of all that on his face, anyway, because Ray looks at him like he’s a baby bunny learning to hop for the first time.

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ray says. “Did you hear that Ben and Steven broke up?”


“Nothing salacious, from what I’ve been able to gather, more of a let’s-just-be-friends thing
according to all concerned. Still, they’re two cute eligible men. I’m sure they’ll both find someone else."

Blinking, Patrick starts to get the shape of what Ray’s saying.

“Wait, are you saying that I should date Ben? Or Steven?” he asks, smiling in shock.

“Not necessarily! Patrick, it’s wonderful that you’re so happy. I just hope you know there are options for you out there.”

“Not you too,” Patrick mutters. “Jeez, Ray. I’m not single.”

Ray shrugs. “Your Facebook page says otherwise.”

It’s like a gut punch. His Facebook is where he talks to his parents, and his aunts and uncle, his cousins. He can’t—it’s not like—

“I haven’t updated it,” he says. “I don’t use it much.” He’s been reading and liking other peoples’ posts, lately, but not making any of his own.

“Good to hear,” Ray says, soothingly. “Other people might not know that.”

Patrick’s distracted for the rest of the day, thinking about that. About what other people might think of him and David, what they might look like from the outside.

* *

“You should come to my mom’s asbestos thing tomorrow,” David tells him, as he’s sweeping up and Patrick is cashing out the till. “I have an instinct that she’s going to need some friendly faces afterwards.”

Patrick sucks air through his teeth in sympathy. “Is it not gonna be good?”

“I mean. My mother is stupendous, of course.” David smiles like he knows he sounds silly, but also like, on some level, he does believe it.

“Of course,” Patrick says.

“She’s just—I think there hasn’t been quite the level of support? That she needs? To deliver a truly powerful performance.”

“Mmm, I see.” Patrick smiles; he likes how David looks after his mom. “I can come. Do you think your mother will remember my name this time, or should I be braced to be called Pierre?”

David wanders over to the counter and leans on it, smiling. “She calls you Patrick, now, when you come up in conversation. I think you impressed her, with that dead body advice.”

Patrick is deeply pleased by this; he’s always been the kind of boyfriend that parents approved of, so it’s nice to know he hasn’t lost his touch. That feeling, at least, can be the same. “When I come up in conversation?” he asks.

“You know,” David clears his throat and leans away from the counter again. “When we’re having casual . . . conversations, about our lives, or our work, the things we’re doing day to day.”

Cocking his head, Patrick says, “And you’re doing me day to day.”
“Well. Ideally. I could wish we had more stable accommodations in which to make that happen, but.”

“You talk about me with your family?” It shouldn’t be a surprise, really. David told his sister about them right after their first kiss.

David’s . . . close with his family. Patrick keeps forgetting.

“Not when I can avoid it. But they’re like vultures.”

“Ah. And our relationship is the dead carcass upon which they feast?”

“Okay, maybe a different metaphor.”

Patrick grins. “I’ll come to the asbestos thing.”

*

Patrick thinks about it again the next day, when Alexis comes by the store and informs them that the teenaged boys who’ve been hanging around uselessly have also been stealing from them. Patrick was too annoyed by David’s painful and obvious vanity, and the idea that David is that susceptible to compliments from people other than Patrick, to even notice the theft. In retrospect, it tells him something about where his priorities are.

After she proves it and recovers at least some of their product, Alexis gives both of them a hairflip of victory and dominance, which Patrick objects to.

“Why did I get one?” he grumbles.

“Oh, it means she likes you,” David mutters. “She’s including you.”

“Huh,” Patrick says.

“Don’t get excited. I mean, she’s including you in the category of someone she gets to be superior to and look down on.”

“So. Like you,” Patrick says, after a second. David doesn’t reply, just suppresses a smile and looks down at the counter, which makes Patrick think he’s right. They go back to work, and Patrick can’t stop thinking about it, about the idea that Alexis would just think it was natural to treat Patrick like an extension of her brother, the same way any sister would if her brother were dating a woman.

“So you think that one kid actually liked my sweater, though?” David asks, interrupting his train of thought. Patrick spritzes him with the water bottle.

*

David: DO NOT come to the asbestos thing
David: You don’t want to see this, allow me to spare you this horror

Patrick: ?
Patrick: I thought you wanted me there because of the horror, to support your mom?

David: Stay home, I’m begging you

Patrick: Are you being serious?
David: I’m so serious.

Patrick frowns, confused. The thing is starting in fifteen minutes; he was just about to leave.

Patrick: Okay

He doesn’t get any other texts from David, and it seems really strange, but he doesn’t want to push it. He makes himself some popcorn instead, and settles in to watch a movie.

Alexis: omg why aren’t you here

Patrick: Alexis? You’re in my contacts?

Alexis: um I stole your phone and put myself in it ages ago, keep up, why aren’t you HERE at the THING

Patrick: The asbestos thing? David told me not to come.

Alexis: You should never listen to David!!! omg. Listen to me and get your cute lil butt down here right now. I am saving you a seat.

It’s followed by a winky-face emoji.

Patrick grins at his phone; the fact that she noticed his absence, and wanted to make sure he was there, is surprising. And kind of touching.

Patrick: Okay, on my way I guess?

He throws on his blazer and drives to town hall. Alexis did save him a seat, and when he sits down, she leans into him and explains what’s going on conspiratorially. He, apparently, gets to witness a bit of Rose family history.

Patrick’s glad she stole his phone and put herself in it, because he wouldn’t have missed this for the world. He can’t believe David almost got away with this; he’s glad Alexis was on his side. Like she’s... just a little bit, just a very little bit... his family too, now.

*

After Mrs Rose and David perform and while he’s still trying to wipe the astonished grin off his face, Patrick runs into Stevie at the drinks table. He hasn’t really hung out with her in a while, has only seen her in passing since the store opened and she stopped dropping by as much to help out.

“So, are you gonna break up with David after that performance, or are you the kind of person who finds that sort of thing endearing?” Stevie asks, throwing back her glass of wine.

He knows it’s just a joke, this time, but after the conversation with Ray and David’s assumption that Patrick would want to break up with him, it feels like the last straw.

“I’m not breaking up with him! God, why does everyone keep asking that?”

Stevie jerks her head to the side, clearly amused by his outburst. “Because... your boyfriend just made a complete fool of himself onstage?”

“We’re not even using that word,” Patrick grumbles, and Stevie looks uncomfortable, but also winces a little, like she feels bad for him. She pats him on the shoulder.
“There, there,” she says, not at all genuinely, and Patrick can’t help but smile. He can see why she and David get along so well. She doesn’t take drama very seriously.


“That’s the David Rose special,” Stevie says. She’s pouring herself another glass of red wine, and pours one for Patrick, too. He accepts it, even though he’d prefer a beer. “It’s like watching a dog fall slowly off a ladder.”

Patrick grins at the image. “What kind of dog?” he asks. Stevie holds up a finger, pulling out her phone, and scrolls through for a bit before turning the phone to Patrick.

It’s a picture of a borzoi wearing a giant fluffy black sweater and looking disgruntled.

Stevie starts first, snickering as she holds up the phone, and Patrick joins her, and soon they’re laughing together. Stevie grips his shoulder as they wheeze for breath.

“Okay, okay, you have to send me that picture,” Patrick insists. “Let me give you my number.”

He does, and texts himself from her phone so he’ll have hers. “Now,” Stevie says, putting down her plastic cup. “Let’s go find David and congratulate him on that amazing performance.”

“Let’s,” Patrick laughs.

David is not pleased by their extremely heartfelt, wide-eyed congratulations. Nor does he seem appeased when Patrick offers him a ride home.

“I told you not to come,” he complains at Patrick, as they walk to the car. Patrick shrugs.

“Your sister texted me. Said I shouldn’t miss it. And she was right, since it was the event of the season.”

David’s whole face narrows and he crosses his arms. “I am going to murder her with a straightening iron.”

“Oh, is that what happened to your hair?” Patrick asks, reaching out to touch it. David dodges away.

“Please don’t pretend like you could still be in any way attracted to me after seeing that performance,” he says, batting at Patrick’s hand. Patrick laughs and gets up in his space, walking him back the last few steps to put his back against the car.

“You’re a dork. I’m super into it.” Catching David’s gaze, he kisses him loudly, wetly. It’s about as sexy as David’s hairstyle and Patrick enjoys it just as much.

“Stop,” David says, frown-smiling. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Bold of you to wear that outfit and tell me that.”

“Excuse me, this is head to toe Givenchy. My singing may not be great, but this outfit is gorgeous.”

“Oh, pardon my ignorance,” Patrick says. He finally gets his hand in David’s hair, sweeping it up off his forehead and back, so it looks more like its usual style. “There you go. There you are.” It feels good, his fingers combing through David’s hair, so he does it a couple more times, unnecessarily.

David’s gone kind of still in his arms.
“What?” he asks.

David doesn’t say anything for a long time, his mouth open and his eyes darting away from Patrick’s. Then he says, “Nothing. I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, and kisses him properly.

Later that night, Stevie texts him again: *Sorry I implied that you and David were going to break up.*

**Patrick:** It’s okay, that seems to be the going bet these days.

**Stevie:** You’ve been really good for him, actually, he’s like twenty percent less annoying than usual lately.

That’s nice, but something about it rubs him the wrong way.

**Patrick:** He’s good for me, too.

**Stevie:** Yeah? He’s not driving you nuts with his movie opinions and very particular way of flossing?

Patrick laughs, because maybe Stevie gets it after all. It occurs to him that he should be more bothered by the fact that Stevie’s seen David floss, and think about the conditions under which she’s seen it, and maybe get more jealous of her than he is, but there’s something really forthright about her that makes it hard for him to feel that way. He can’t imagine her having a secret agenda, or texting him for any reason other than that she wants to, that she likes him. He likes her too.

**Patrick:** He’s good for me in other ways?

**Patrick:** I am very confused about the flossing

They trade David stories for a little while, which is nice, because Patrick actually gets the sense that Stevie, underneath all of her Stevie-ness, loves David, unlike Ray or Joon-ho or Jeff or any of Patrick’s other friends who don’t know David very well. She doesn’t think it’s weird to want to be around him. But that also means that it’s safe to complain about David to her, a little, and get back her eyeroll emojis for the stories he tells.

**Stevie:** Yeah he canNOT compromise

**Stevie:** Speaking of. No b word yet huh

**Patrick:** What

**Stevie:** boyyyyyyyyyfriiiiiiiieennnnnd

**Stevie:** I want you to appreciate how long that took to type, autocorrect wants me dead now

Patrick thinks about it, about David’s insistence that Patrick should probably break up with him, about how he still assumes that Patrick won’t want him to stay the night.

**Patrick:** no b word

**Patrick:** he strikes me as someone who’s NOT gonna say that kind of stuff

**Patrick:** and I’m not dumb enough to say it first, who knows what that will unleash

**Stevie:** huh. solid call
Stevie: leave it to me.

Patrick texts back What?? but Stevie doesn’t reply.

*

A couple days later, when Stevie drops by the store in the morning, Patrick’s mostly forgotten about it. He thinks he and Stevie are just having fun messing with David about his inability to compromise, right up until David goes off to get the tote bags, and they smirk as they move the toilet plungers, and Stevie nods to herself, satisfied. “End of the day,” she says.

“End of the day, what?” Patrick asks.

“The key is to get him all flustered. Provoke him into a big speech. Once he starts talking about stuff he cares about he won’t be able to stop. It’ll come out.” She turns to look him in the eyes. “The b word.”

“Because of toilet plungers? Really?”

“Really.”

Patrick has no idea how Stevie could know that, and it makes him feel a little disgruntled, that she knows so much about David that he doesn’t. But it does end up working: David does call him his boyfriend, while also making fun of his shoes, and then after Stevie leaves he sits on his lap, still making smart remarks. Patrick’s chest feels full, like the way he feels for David is taking up all the space in his lungs and heart and veins.

“Sock feet in a public place is also incorrect,” David smiles.

“We do what we have to do,” Patrick replies, mouth brushing David’s as he speaks. They kiss, softly at first, until Patrick opens his mouth and draws David in, and then it’s hotter, wilder, with David’s hand rubbing up and down his chest.

Patrick thinks, again, about how many people walking by can see this, about how they’re lit up like a beacon in the dark.

“So is this when I should break up with you?” Patrick asks, when David pulls back from their kiss. Patrick likes this, David in his lap, and makes a note to do it more in the future. “It’s whenever things are going good, right?”

“Um,” David says, eyes darting to the sides. “That would be traditional, yes.”

“I think I’m gonna keep doing the opposite of breaking up with you,” Patrick says, and kisses him again.

They don’t find a place that night, but they do keep fucking in stolen moments: in the back of David’s family’s car; the next Monday when Ray is out of the house; one night in a hotel room that Patrick books in Elmdale after they see a movie together. Every single time, Patrick feels like his body is discovering something new, like David is peeling his skin back one layer at a time, revealing his soul underneath.

It’s terrifying. He loves it.

Joon-ho: So from the look on your face last week you didn’t need any tips after all
Patrick: I think if the sex were any better I would have to enter a monastery to calm down

Joon-ho: There aren’t any United Church monasteries. You’d have to convert?

Patrick: I’d do it. I’d have to

*  

Patrick calls his mom to talk about her tomatoes and her foster cat, without giving her any other news, and he stares at his Facebook status for days before leaving it set to single.

He rejoices in every moment when his friends and his teammates tease him about his boyfriend, talk about his relationship like there’s nothing more normal and expected in the world than for him to date a man, to date David Rose.

He gets David a one-month anniversary gift, a cake that says Not Broken Up Yet!!! on the top in icing, which David doesn’t seem to think is funny, but which Patrick thinks is hilarious. David comes around on it once Patrick starts feeding him pieces of it, anyway, which leads to David closing his lips around Patrick’s icing-covered fingers and sucking slowly, which leads to a pretty messy but very fun one-month anniversary celebration.

“I like this,” Patrick admits, after, gathering up some of the icing that somehow got onto David’s forehead and offering it to him. David licks it slowly. “I like doing this.”

“That’s very convenient for me,” David says, sighing. Patrick gathers up another smear of the icing.

“You like it too,” Patrick says. “Me feeding you.”

“Um. Yeah,” David says, sounding hoarse. This time, Patrick lets his finger slip inside David’s mouth, and David sucks it. Patrick came like five minutes ago, but his dick gives a sad, tired little twitch of appreciation anyway.

It makes him wonder what else might be like that. For them.

*

The next day, when there’s a lull at the store, he walks up to the counter where David is poking at the store’s laptop, concentrating fiercely. It’s the extremely cute look he gets on his face when he has to do something with one of Patrick’s spreadsheets, or with forms. Patrick wants to make him do more forms just to make his brow furrow and his tongue stick out of the side of his mouth like that.

He tosses his credit card down on the keyboard, interrupting David’s typing. He looks up, confused.

“Get me some new shoes,” he says, feeling weirdly breathless about it. “For the store. Something correct.”

David’s eyes widen, and Patrick thinks he’s not the only one who’s still thinking about it. That maybe David would like to dress him, after all.

“And under a hundred dollars,” he amends. David’s eyes narrow.

“Ohay, you should know that there is literally no benefit to buying cheap shoes—”

“The sooner you find them, the sooner they’ll arrive,” Patrick points out. “I wear an eight.”

David smiles at him, eyes dark. Patrick’s whole body lights up. He goes to finish restocking the
hand-bound recycled paper notebooks; someone bought a bunch of them as birthday party favours, and he’s pretty sure there are more colours in the back.

* 

That little tune in E major still won’t get out of his head, so he pulls out his guitar on a rainy evening and starts working his way through it. It’s in the soft, alt-country style that he tends to prefer, but for some reason it also makes him think of David, of the way he feels when David is around. He’s starting to hear some lyrics for it, too, in his head, though he’s not quite at the point where he’s willing to write them down. It’s been a long time since he’s written a song. He’s fiddling his way through what might be the chorus when Ray comes in behind him.

“Hello!” he says, brightly.

Patrick startles; he didn’t know Ray was home. “Hi,” he says. He kind of wants to pretend he wasn’t just sitting here and playing the guitar by himself like an emo teen, but that’s not an option anymore.

“I wondered if I’d ever get to hear you play that thing, or if it was just gathering dust in your closet,” Ray says. “That was pretty, what was it?”

“It’s—nothing. Just playing around.”

“Hm. I see. You write music, too?”

Patrick shakes his head, not wanting to go down this road. “Mostly I do arrangements. Covers. Just for fun.”

“Do you know any Carole King? She’s my absolute favourite,” Ray enthuses. Patrick grins, because this is what he always liked about being able to play the guitar. He always loved it when he was around a campfire or at a cookout and he was able to play the different requests that people asked for. It made them happy, to hear the song in their head suddenly alive in the air, and Patrick always felt a connection with them in that moment, through their shared enjoyment of the same song.

He breaks into a little “You’ve Got a Friend,” which he thinks he still knows the chords for. He mumbles through part of it, then fast forwards himself to the part he remembers: “You just call out my name. And you know wherever I am. I’ll come running, running, yeah yeah, to see you again. Winter spring summer or fall, all you have to do is call and I’ll be there, yes I will, you’ve got a friend.”

He smiles kind of cheesily as he trails off, feeling silly and awkward to be singing to Ray in a way that’s actually kind of genuine. Even in his old open mic days, he never sang to anyone, not even Rachel. Ray doesn’t seem embarrassed, though that’s probably because he’s physically incapable of it.

“Oh, that’s such a good one, Patrick. You sing very nicely! We should do karaoke sometime.”

“Where is there karaoke around here?” Patrick laughs. He’s pretty sure The Wobbly Elm doesn’t do it.

“Some of us drive to Elmdale for it on occasion. Though that makes it a little difficult to drink enough to really do great karaoke.”

“Huh.” His fingers are still fiddling over the strings, finding their way through bits of “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?” which was always one of his mother’s favourites. He used to play for her on rainy Sundays, when she couldn’t get out to her garden, to cheer her up.
He should call her more often.

“Perhaps, however, those slow ballads aren’t quite right for a young man like yourself, caught in the first blush of love,” Ray teases. “The one you were playing when I came in sounded happier.”

“Yeah, I don’t know if David likes Carole King,” Patrick agrees, trying to sound calm and normal and not at all like a young man caught in the first blush of love, good lord. David probably does like Carole King, though. He was actually right, in his initial assessment; he and David do get together on the divas, women with big voices and women singer-songwriters, judging by the music David’s put on in the car during their trips to Elmdale: Aretha, Mariah, Tina. Even a little Celine and Sarah, when he’s had some wine.

“Have you played for him?” Ray’s getting that soft, squishy look around his face, the way he looks at Meg Ryan movies or when he’s trying to matchmake. Patrick frowns. He doesn’t know that David would want to be played for.

“No,” he says. His fingers pluck a few strings, some little piece of a melody he thinks he’s heard recently, on the radio or on one of David’s playlists: F, G, B-flat, A. He blinks, recognizing it. He looks down at his hands, and plucks it out again, then a third time. He knows this song.


*

Jeff starts sowing discontent on the Café Tropical team, or so he says; Patrick has kind of a hard time picturing Jeff saying anything mean about anyone, but according to reports he makes to Patrick and Ronnie, he’s enflaming the other players’ anger towards Jack.

“It’s not hard,” Jeff reports. “They’ve got a lot to be angry about. He put Melissa in the outfield, even though she’s our best catcher, and he keeps switching around the base players until they don’t know what they’re doing. Plus he will not even listen to suggestions anymore, it’s all got to be done his way.”

“Is it just incompetence?” Patrick asks, sipping his tea, ducking down in the booth in case anyone overhears them. “Or malice?”

“I think he’s just a dick,” Ronnie says. She doesn’t bother to lower her voice, and Patrick winces.

“Are we sure we want to have this meeting here? At the team’s sponsoring business?”

“No one would notice anything if you weren’t acting so suspicious,” Ronnie scowls. “If you act like you’ve got something to hide, Twyla will sniff that out in a second.”

Twyla, in fact, chooses that moment to come up to their table. “Anything else, folks?”

“Just more coffee,” Ronnie says, making eye contact with Twyla, then, pointedly, with Patrick.

“I’m just saying, we could’ve done this in private.”

“My coup, my rules,” Ronnie says. Patrick rolls his eyes.

Jeff looks between them thoughtfully. “So, I have an idea on how to make this more believable.”

*

They wait for a relatively well-attended game, when they’re playing at home against the Elk Lake
“Ronnie! That is a bad call, there’s no way we can—”

“Maybe you can’t, but I actually know what I’m doing here, so—”

“I can’t believe you’re so hung up on your own idea that you can’t see what’s right in front of you!” Patrick throws down his glove. “You’re wasting this team’s potential!”

The ump tries to interject. “Um, if we can get back to the game—”

“No! No, we are not getting back to the game, not while this annoying little thumb of a man is undermining my authority and pretending like he knows better! How long you been in this town, rookie?”

“How long have you been complacent at the top?” Patrick shoots back. “You know what, if you don’t want me on your team, I don’t have to be on your team. I’m out of here.”

He picks up his glove—it was the wrong move to throw it to the ground, that’s his own equipment—and takes off his Bob’s Garage hat instead, throwing it to the ground.

“Fine!” Ronnie shouts after him. “Good riddance!”

He joins Jack’s team the next day, with a sob story about Ronnie being mean that Jack buys into way too easily.

**Patrick:** Phase two complete

**Ronnie:** You mean you’re on the team? You don’t actually need to act like a secret agent, fyi

**Patrick:** Fine, yes, I’m on the team. Third base.

**Ronnie:** Good. That’ll already make Cafe Tropical more interesting to play against.

**Jeff:** Plus at least I’ll have some decent company on this sinking ship

Patrick smiles.

* For their two-month anniversary, Patrick gets one of their vendors to spell out the words *D&P: Continuing To Date!* to form a small but intricate keychain-sized wood carving. David frowns even as he opens it, then pulls it out of the little white jewelry box with a look of complete distaste.

“So this is what I get, for confessing my fears to you,” he says. “Endlessly mocked and derided.”

“I’m celebrating our togetherness,” Patrick says, pouting a little. “It’s sad you can’t see that.”

“Well, you may think it’s funny, but you’re going to jinx it.”

Patrick pushes David down onto the couch. Ray’s out for the evening, thanks to Patrick telling him it was their anniversary and making puppy dog eyes, and Patrick wants to make the most of it.

“I’m not, actually,” he says, because he doesn’t see how it’s possible, when he likes David this much, wants to be with him this much. The feeling inside of him is so big, so untouchable; he couldn’t make it stop if he wanted to. “We’re immune.”
“Hmm. That is also jinxing us, in case you’re wondering.”

Patrick cups his hand over David’s dick, outside his pants. “Feels like things are still on track.”

David rocks his hips up, grinding against Patrick’s hand. It lights a fire in Patrick’s belly, same as it always does, ratcheting him up to breathless, desperate desire ridiculously quickly. *Is this just how people feel about sex*, he asked Joon-ho, weeks and weeks ago, and to his surprise it really is, or at least, it’s how he feels about it, about sex with someone he wants and loves. It hasn’t gotten less intense over time, though he’s gotten somewhat better at handling it.

“Well, I never said I didn’t want sex for our anniversary,” David hums. “We’ve got the place all night?”

“Well, I never said I didn’t want sex for our anniversary,” David hums. “We’ve got the place all night?”

“Whole house. We could fuck on Ray’s desk if we wanted to.”

“Ugh, please tell me that’s not a real fantasy.”

“It’s not a real fantasy,” Patrick replies, dutifully, rubbing his palm up and down, giving David messy, incomplete friction. He clears his throat and manages to get the words out, to ask for the thing he’s been thinking about. “The thing you talked about a while ago, though . . . that’s a real fantasy.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Patrick grunts. He doesn’t like having to say it. David’s much better at talking about it, but because he’s much better at talking about it, he’s constantly issuing a stream of incandescently hot dirty talk that he promptly forgets about the next day. But David’s mentioned this one a couple times, now. “Where I watch you do it to yourself.”

He bends down and kisses David’s mouth, slow and sure. David kisses back with a lot more speed and desperation, which makes sense given how hard he’s getting in his pants. Fuck. Patrick loves being able to turn him on like this. It doesn’t get old.

“Mmm, I am definitely into that, but,” he kisses Patrick again, “but I kind of want . . . for tonight, maybe more . . . contact?”

“Aw,” Patrick says. “You do have feelings about our anniversary.” He slides a hand up under David’s sweater and plays with his nipple. David squirms under him, looking a little wrecked already. It’s so good.

“I have feelings about wanting all this man up against me.” David’s hands run over Patrick’s face, down past his t-shirt to splay over his waist.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I wanna see you when you lose it, the way you make me lose it,” David says. Patrick bites his lip, then kisses David again so he doesn’t have to keep looking at him. They’ve only been fucking for a little over a month, and David already knows him so well, knows what he likes. As many times as they’ve had sex, it’s still disconcerting.

“Let’s do that, then,” Patrick says, burying his face and his words in David’s neck.

It’s a good thing they do have the house to themselves. They’re tearing each others’ clothes off as they get to the bedroom, and Patrick gets the lube and fingers David open, fast and sloppy. They roll and gasp and grapple a while, making out leisurely, until David climbs on top of Patrick, taking his dick deep inside with one slow, practiced movement, and proceeds to ride him until he loses his
entire mind.

After, Patrick leaves lazy trails of kisses down David’s belly, up his sides, not thinking much about it but enjoying the sensation of his mouth on David’s skin, mind full of quiet, soothing cotton.

“This is going to be a really painful reminder to have around when you do inevitably get tired of me,” David says, looking at the keychain again, only half joking. “At least I could eat the cake.”

“Not tired of you yet,” Patrick replies, laving his tongue slowly over David’s nipple.

Behind him, on the nightstand, his phone beeps. He takes a second to check it, just in case it’s Ray and he’s coming home early.

It’s not Ray; it’s Rachel. Rachel hasn’t texted him in months.

akf;i5tGH, it reads. Patrick’s stomach falls. Nonsense letters. To pretend she hadn’t texted him at all.

“Who is it?” David yawns.

“Nobody,” Patrick says, and deletes the text.

*  

He and Ronnie pretend to make up at the next LGBTQ2AI-plus night, eyeballing each other and shaking hands firmly, to applause from the room in general. But by then Patrick’s already installed on Jack’s team, and realizing why everyone else stopped playing on Jack’s team.

Jack is a huge dick. He’s not just capricious and bad at management, he’s also . . . generally speaking, a giant dick.

“This guy is a complete dick,” Patrick says, to Jeff, while they watch Jack throwing what can only be termed a temper tantrum over Victor’s inability to field a ground ball.

“Yeah. This would be immature for Scout, much less a grownup human person. Honestly I’ve never seen him this bad. I think he’s threatened by your presence.”

“What?” Patrick has gone out of his way to be meek and accommodating, since he came to this team. Which is hard, because everything Jack does is objectively wrong and Patrick really, really wants to fix it. He’s been biding his time. “Me?”

“He fears you. He may not know why you’re here but he can feel it. Instinctually.”

“Okay.” Patrick watches Jack storm off to the stands and start going through his stuff, throwing items angrily on the ground until he finds his water bottle. “That man doesn’t have instincts. He is a baby of a person.”

“Compelling argument. I don’t know. Maybe he sees everyone as a threat. Maybe he’s just getting worse the longer he’s in power.”

“That’s more likely.” Patrick grimaces; he had expected to gently call for an election, to oust Jack and then shake his hand, to keep him on the team. But now he’s seeing that Jack’s actually . . . kind of dangerous, kind of a bad person, not just in his leadership role but in general. The more Patrick watches him, the more his tantrums seem vicious instead of just immature, the more his anger is clearly out of proportion to what’s going on around him. His presence alone twists and distorts the team dynamic.
He thinks there was a time when he might not have realized it, might have brushed it aside, or said that Jack was childish, but harmless. It’s the kind of thing he used to say, confronted with this kind of behaviour. Jack reminds Patrick of plenty of other men he’s known. His Uncle Doug. Guys in high school, bullies, who he had to put up with, who were on the same sports teams as him. In grade eleven, he actually quit hockey over someone like Jack, who treated the new grade nine kids the way Jack is treating his just-for-fun municipal baseball team. Men who thought they had to do this kind of shit to be men.

It makes Patrick furious.

“Do we stick to the plan?”

Patrick tugs at the brim of his Café Tropical baseball cap and chews his gum. He’s not quitting this time.

“No. We escalate. When can we get the team together without Jack knowing?”

* 

“So, we’re trying to figure out ways to kick him out,” Patrick explains, a couple days later at the store.

“Um, I think I told you to do this ages ago,” David points out, looking up from the tote bags he’s rearranging. “I said you should be in charge of that troupe.”

Patrick grins. “Team? It’s true, you did say that. Well, now there’s a more pressing reason. This Jack guy is . . . really terrible.”

David grimaces. “Is it like. Safe, though?”

Patrick’s had the same thought. “Well, I think it’s less safe to do nothing,” he says, after a minute. David takes a little breath, in and out in a huff, and then nods.

“I get that. Okay.”

“Aw, are you worried about me?” Patrick asks, smiling, teasing.

Rolling his eyes, David says, “Mmm, more worried about me learning way too much about the baseball if this continues.”

“Oh. It’s true, next thing you know you’ll be playing on the team yourself.”

David glares at him. “Let’s not be absurd.”

“You’d look cute in the uniform.” Patrick was just teasing, going along with the flow of their banter, but the image that comes up in his mind when he says this is . . . compelling. Worth thinking more about.


“Oh?” Patrick asks, interested, walking over towards him. “That took a while.”

“I had to wait for a sale. I stalked various websites until I could pounce.” This with some explanatory pouncing hand gestures that Patrick can’t take his eyes off of. He smiles.

“Hmm, sounds like very difficult and dangerous work.”
“It was, in fact? You never know when you might accidentally buy a knockoff.”

“Hey, that’s our code word,” Patrick says, leaning in to kiss him.

David pushes him away. “It’s still not our code word. We don’t have a code word.”

“I think our relationship would be objectively more exciting with a makeouts code word,” Patrick mourns.

Rolling his eyes, David kisses him after all, quick and soft. “Our codeword can be ‘hey David, come kiss me.’”

“Not as fun,” Patrick says. Also, a lot harder to say. But Patrick knows that it matters to David, so he makes an effort. “Hey David, come kiss me.”

David’s eyes light up, and he comes and kisses him, for longer this time. Then they’re interrupted by customers for a while, and Patrick has to make do with the hot speculative looks that David shoots him occasionally from across the store.

“So where are they?” Patrick asks later. David feigns ignorance, so he adds, “My shoes.”

“Oh, your shoes,” David nods. “At the motel.”

“At the motel, really. And why wouldn’t you bring them here to give them to me?”

David’s smile knocks that pitch out of the park. “Because I wanted to give them to you in private.”


A few hours later, when they close, David locks the door and turns to him. “Give me a lift home?” he asks. Patrick just nods. He’s far, far too excited about this, and he’s not even sure why, or what it means, or if it means the same thing to David that it means to him.

David’s room is empty, which is a relief.

“Sit down,” David says. Patrick does, on the end of David’s bed, with its black and white bedding, everything made just so, the corners of the sheets and the pillowcase fresh and crisp. He likes how David likes things tidy; it’s not what Patrick would’ve expected, the first time he met him, with his nine voicemails and his scribbled-over form, but it makes sense now that he knows him better. It’s in the precise way he double-knots his sneakers, in the way he arranges all the products at the store so the labels face out at the exact same angle. It’s a thing they have in common, that desire for order. For control.

David brings over a shoebox and, without a word, kneels down at Patrick’s feet. The bed is pretty low, so it doesn’t quite put him into a suggestive position, but it does mean he’s a bit shorter than Patrick for a change.

Patrick tries to keep breathing through his nose, to keep his breaths slower and more even than they want to be, with David kneeling in front of him, untying his shoes. He’s switched to wearing dress shoes more often, at the store, but he hasn’t stopped wearing what David called his mountaineering shoes, if only because David gives him a hilariously dark look every time he does. He happens to be wearing them today.

“Just not appropriate for a place of business,” David tsks, nonetheless loosening them carefully and
respectfully before slipping them off Patrick’s feet. He flips open the shoebox, and Patrick sees brown leather. It looks rich, the colour deep.

“Bruno Magli,” David says. “Not necessarily my first pick for you, but available in this case on deep discount.”

“They look nice,” Patrick says. His fingers grip David’s sheets maybe a little too tightly. “I saw that they were exactly ninety-nine dollars, on my credit card statement.”

“Well. I might’ve chipped in a little.”

Patrick suppresses a smile; he knew it. “I didn’t ask you to do that.”

“Worth it, to see you in something nice,” David says. He takes Patrick’s right foot and guides it into the shoe; Patrick cooperates by pushing his heel down until his foot is all the way in. It feels really, really comfortable, and it looks good, not too fancy. It looks like something he would wear, just a little dressier. It goes up the ankle a little, almost like a boot. Almost like the mountaineering shoes David derided.

David looked for something he’d like, based on what Patrick already wore. It makes Patrick feel good, disproportionately good for someone receiving a pair of shoes. It makes him feel seen, and . . . special.

David laces up the shoe, fingers moving quick and sure, pulling tight, so Patrick’s foot feels safe and enclosed. The bow he ties is perfectly symmetrical. Then he does the same with the left, slipping Patrick’s foot inside, lacing, tying. His knots are beautiful; the Scouts would’ve been proud. Once he’s done, he pulls the cuffs of Patrick’s jeans down over the top of them.

“You like them?” David asks. He’s kneeling up higher, his hands running up Patrick’s thighs.

“Yeah,” Patrick says, and wraps his arms around him, and takes his mouth. David kisses back eagerly, and Patrick doesn’t know why but it’s so hot, this weird simple thing, David putting his shoes on him, David picking out his shoes and tying them tight on his feet. He wants David to push him down to the bed and fuck him, and he wants to push David down to the bed and fuck him, and he wants—he wants it all, he doesn’t know what he wants, he wants something.

He keeps kissing David, open-mouthed and deep now, and if they keep on kissing then maybe Patrick won’t have to decide what he wants. He could stay like this forever, inside this kiss, desiring so much that he doesn’t know how to articulate.

It’s just as well neither of them tries to take it any further, because Alexis comes back then, and they have to break apart. David stands up from his kneeling position, his hand still on Patrick’s shoulder.

“Um, only when no one’s home, David,” Alexis says, breezing in and throwing her stuff down haphazardly on her bed and the table.

“Relax, no one’s naked,” David says, as if there hadn’t been an imminent danger of that happening right before she arrived.

“Ew,” Alexis proclaims.

“Hi, Alexis,” Patrick says, smiling at her. She smiles back.

“Hi, Patrick,” she smiles. “Still dating my brother, I see.”
“Yup,” Patrick says, resigned to hearing this by now. “And with no signs of stopping anytime soon.”

“Well. Isn’t that sweet.”

“It’s extremely sweet,” David interrupts, voice rising. “And it’d be sweeter if you didn’t come home at exactly the time you said you’d be out.”

“Hmph. It’s not my fault I needed to finish my Marketing project, David.” Then she looks at Patrick again, and smiles a little mischievously. “But I can clear right out if you want.”

“It’s, it’s okay,” Patrick stutters. “I’ll get going and let you . . . use the space. For that.” He can’t imagine going back to—whatever they were doing, with Alexis outside smirking, knowing that they’re doing it. And the mood between them was strange, fragile; Patrick’s not sure they could get it back. If he even wants it to come back. He stands up.

“Are you sure?” David asks him, in an undertone. Patrick shakes his head.

“We can . . . come back to that,” Patrick murmurs back to him, and kisses him softly.

“Aw,” Alexis says, after a moment. They break apart again.


“I got that baseball thing tonight anyway,” he says, running a hand down David’s arm. “Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Yes,” David says, nodding emphatically. “Tomorrow.” He kisses Patrick again, and then Patrick leaves, shoebox under his arm, new shoes gleaming on his feet whenever he looks down. The image sticks with him all the way home, then all the way to the baseball field behind the co-op, the smirk on David’s face as he tied them, the way he surged up into Patrick’s arms afterwards.

It’s something to think about.

*  

As part of their coup plan, Jeff’s the one who gets the team together, at his house, and Jeff’s the one who starts it off, asking everyone to discuss Jack’s recent behaviour and what they think of it. It’s a smart move; Patrick’s inclination would’ve been to list all of Jack’s faults and make a strong case for kicking him off, since it’s obviously the correct course of action. With Jeff’s way, though, all the points Patrick would’ve made come from other people, so it feels more like group consensus. It’s surprisingly effective. And it alerts them both to the fact that some of Jack’s behaviours are not just dickish but pretty sexist.

“It’s supposed to be a co-ed team,” Melissa grouses. “Nobody else even wants to be catcher, it’s just that Jack wants to pitch and he doesn’t like me telling him what to do.”

“Well that’s bullshit,” Jeff pronounces.

“Yeah, he’s a control freak,” Candice agrees. “And he knows he can get away with controlling women more easily.” She glares at Patrick and Victor and Wondo, daring them to challenge this. Wondo puts his hands up.

“I believe you,” he says.

“He’s also said some weird stuff to me,” Jeff puts in. “Like. Nothing you’d really notice on its own,
but when there are a few comments like that . . .” he trails off. “It’s been making me uncomfortable. I was glad that Patrick joined the team, I kind of wanted someone from outside to tell me if I was making it up or not.”

Patrick frowns. He hasn’t noticed that, yet, but now he knows to watch more carefully. “I know I’m new on the team,” he says. “But I gotta say, I’m really shocked by what I’ve seen since I’ve been here, and what you’ve all told me. I actually don’t think it’s enough just to put someone else in as team captain.”

Jeff raises an eyebrow at him, because that wasn’t the original coup plan. Patrick shrugs back. “We should kick him off the team entirely,” Victor agrees. Patrick looks around at the team, a lot of whom are nodding. He thinks about the jumped-up masculine behaviour on his teams in high school, about those boys who would call other boys bitch or homo or princess to egg them on. He never used to think about it that much, just put it aside as the inevitable immature crap you have to deal with to play sports. But the more he hears from his teammates, the more he’s remembering: shit people said around him, that he didn’t challenge. Shit people said to him. Shit he said. He’s angry, in retrospect, incandescently angry, at all those old cuts he taught himself not to notice, and taught himself to inflict.

In contrast, he thinks about Ronnie’s team, where Terry was seven months pregnant before Patrick took over for them. Where Danielle is the star shortstop. Where Ronnie is loose with the trash talk and occasionally infuriatingly stubborn, but would never say anything actually hurtful or personal.

Someone like Jack can do a lot of harm. It only takes a little poison; that’s what Patrick’s remembering, now. It only takes a little. Patrick came to accept it, really quickly, back in high school. The Café Tropical team has gotten used to it, too. And Jack really is a good pitcher; there are other teams in the area that would take him in a heartbeat. Other teams where his poison would spread.

“I think we should go further,” Patrick says, slowly. “I think we should get him banned from municipal sports.”

* *

He texts his dad a picture Jeff took, of him in practice, jumping up to catch a ball. It’s a great action shot; even David showed interest in it, though Patrick suspects that had more to do with the kind of tight baseball uniform that the Café Tropical team wears.

Dad: Looking good, son! Just like old times, huh?
Dad: No matter where you go, you’re still the same kid

Patrick texts back agreement. He wonders if it’s true, if he is the same kid. He wonders if he wants it to be true. Most of all, he wonders if his dad would still think that, if he truly knew him now.

* *

Patrick swings by the motel one night to pick David up for a date, only to be stopped by his phone beeping at him as soon as he pulls up.

David: Sorry omg can you wait for me in the lobby?
David: I am having a MOMENT with Alexis

Patrick texts back Sure, even though he can very clearly hear David and Alexis arguing through the door as soon as he gets out of the car. In the lobby, Stevie is reading behind the desk, which seems...
“Hey,” she says, as he walks in. “I think you’ll find David in the screamnasium, few doors that way.” She jerks her thumb in the direction of David and Alexis’s room.

“Oh, I heard. Thought I’d wait for him here. What are they arguing about?”

“I think it’s something about whether it would be off-brand for her to join David on his buying trip tomorrow?”

“He doesn’t want to take her with him?” Patrick would actually feel better if someone went along with him on the buying trip. He sometimes has visions of David getting lost on back country roads and never being seen again. He doesn’t have the most inborn sense of direction. Patrick, by contrast, has an excellent sense of direction, but isn’t as good with the vendors as David is.

“Oh, he’ll take her with him, eventually. They just need to have the argument first.”

Patrick tries not to smile too hard. David’s way of caring for his sister, while also constantly bickering with her, was one of the first things Patrick liked about him. After his, like, face.

“You’re disgusting,” Stevie pronounces.

“What?”

“You think it’s cute.”

“I definitely do not. I hate . . . when someone makes me wait. It’s very impolite.”

Stevie puts her book down entirely, leaning forward on the counter. Having her full attention, with no one else in the room, is intense. “You know what, I think that’s true. I think you do think it’s impolite. I think you do hate it. And you think David’s so cute that you don’t even care.”

Patrick clears his throat. “So what are you reading?”


“You’re reading a sequel to the worst book you’ve ever read?”

“I just need to know how much worse it can get, y’know?”

Patrick smiles. “So you spent thirty-five dollars on the hardcover.”

“Requested it from the library,” she says.

“Ah.”

Mr Rose comes in the door then, holding a huge basket of pink flowers. “All right, Stevie, I’m just going to toss these carnations, they are doing more harm than good,” he calls out, coming in the door.

“Oh, hello, Patrick,” he says, smiling.
“Hi, Mr Rose.” He and Stevie watch, quirking eyebrows at each other, as Mr Rose disposes of the carnations in a not-very-elegant way.

“What brings you down here?” he asks, once he’s done.

“Just picking up David,” Patrick says. “Here, you’ve got a little—” he reaches out, brushing petals off of his jacket.

“Oh, thank you, yes,” Mr Rose says. “So you and David are—you’re still, uh—”

“Dating,” Patrick says, quickly, to stop whatever gesture Mr Rose is about to make with his hand. “Yes.”

“That’s good, that’s good. Glad to hear it. You know, back when David was dating Stevie, I said, and Stevie remembers this, I said, I’m just as happy if David brings a guy home. Either way! Yeah.” He trails off, nodding enthusiastically. Stevie looks equal parts embarrassed and amused.

“I wouldn’t really say that David and I dated,” she says, eventually. “It was pretty short-term.”

“Well, but you spent some nights together, I do remember that, Stevie.”

Patrick has to cover his mouth so he doesn’t actually laugh out loud. David’s dad is so embarrassing, in such a dad way.

“Thanks for the reminder, Mr Rose. I’m sure Patrick really appreciates it.”

“Oh, I’m fine, Stevie, thanks,” Patrick manages, just barely holding himself together. “I’m here for any stories of David’s past exploits that Mr Rose wants to regale us with.”

He is, actually; he wonders about it sometimes, whether David only ever dated Sebastiens before he got here, or whether there were other people . . . well. More like Patrick.

“Oh, ha, I’m not sure David would want me doing that,” Mr Rose smiles. “And anyway, you know, we weren’t always that involved. Business kept me away from home a lot, back then.”

“There must be some stories from when David was young, though,” Stevie says, leaning over the counter eagerly. Patrick grins at her. Mr Rose clearly takes the request seriously.

“Let me think. Well, there was the time he dated an older boy in high school. Turned into kind of a disaster, if I recall. He was away in boarding school, of course, but there were a lot of sudden weekend flights home, because he said he missed Adelina’s cooking.”

It’s not quite the kind of story Patrick was hoping to hear. He doesn’t know what he expected; David’s only made brief references to his past, but he’s pretty much never made a positive one. He coughs, catches Stevie’s eye. She frowns at him, then shrugs.

Patrick tries to change the subject, and goes with the first thing that flits into his mind. “So, David had already come out to you, then?” he asks. Stevie’s eyes go wide and she shakes her head, clearly afraid of what off-colour anecdote that question will spark. Patrick wants to take it back, but he also really wants to hear about it.

“No, no, that was later. It was a bit of a shock when David came out to us. We had always assumed he was gay.”

Patrick laughs. “You assumed,” he says. He can’t imagine such a thing. Except, trying to conjure up
the image of David Rose at seven or eight, he almost can. It’s a delightful thought.

“Well, his mother assumed, and I accepted her word on the subject, for the most part.”

Patrick wonders what’s lurking under that last qualifier, but isn’t going to ask. Whatever Johnny Rose might’ve thought, to himself, when he found out his son wasn’t straight, and however embarrassing he still is about it, he clearly loves and supports him. David doesn’t talk about his father that much, not like he does his mother and his sister, but when he does it’s always with fondness, and exasperation, and respect.

“That’s a really sweet story,” Stevie says. “Though I was going for more of the nosepicking and bedwetting varieties.”

Mr Rose opens his mouth to speak, and just then David walks through the door to the office.

“Last-minute save,” Stevie says, grinning. “Mr Rose, let’s pick up this conversation another time, huh?”

“Why? What are you all talking about in here?” David takes off his sunglasses and glares. Patrick walks over to him. He’s in a fuzzy white and black sweater that makes Patrick want to touch him.

“We’re talking about you. Hi there,” Patrick says, and leans up to kiss him, there in front of his father and his best friend. David cups his cheek briefly, rings brushing Patrick’s skin, and kisses him back.

“Hi,” he breathes. Then he says, “Wait, what?”

Stevie laughs. On his way out the door, Mr Rose clasps Patrick’s shoulder briefly.

* 

Jeff leads the team in confronting Jack at the next scheduled team practice. Candice and Wondo speak up with him, and the rest of the team nods along, but it’s Jeff who takes point, standing up in front of the bleachers where the team is sitting and going through the laundry list of reasons why they don’t want Jack on the team anymore. He’s clear, and concise, and mentions respect but doesn’t go into detail on the sexist and transphobic stuff the team members have noticed. Nonetheless, Jack, predictably, throws a fit.

It starts with yelling, then moves on to appeals to various players and their loyalty, then continues on through bitter accusations of betrayal. It’s bizarre how boring it all is: Patrick feels like he knows every single move this guy has, every affronted reaction, every play in his playbook. He can’t really remember why he used to avoid guys like this, why he used to think nothing could be done about them. Anyone could out-strategize an unimaginative asshole like this.

He guesses he used to care more about ... everything Jack apparently cares about.

“So you’re all conspiring against me,” Jack says, eventually. Patrick’s been watching his hands curl gradually into fists, and now he watches as those fists begin to rise, from Jack’s sides to the level of his waist. He edges closer to Jeff’s side, so that his body is in position in case he needs to intercede physically. He’s not letting anyone else take a punch. He hopes. He doesn’t really know how to take a punch himself, but he thinks he can figure it out in the moment.

He’s not subtle enough about it, though, apparently, because Jack turns to him, spotting the motion, and his eyes narrow. Patrick keeps his body language open, gentle. His heart picks up, just a little. He doesn’t want to have to hit anyone, but he knows the theory, if need be. Jack kind of comes off like someone who participates in a lot of bar fights, but Patrick’s plan is to pin his wrists before he
can get a swing in. He rehearses the motion in his mind, programming it into his muscles in advance, the way he would for the swing of a bat or the strum of a guitar.

“And you. This was your idea, wasn’t it? The team was fine before you got here.”

“I mean, it wasn’t,” Candice says.

“Not at all,” Jeff agrees.

Patrick holds up his hands. “I won’t lie, Jack, I was really shocked when I got here and saw how you were treating people. Not to mention mismanaging the team. When was the last time you even had a win?”

He was right to predict that this, more than anything about respect or team dynamics, is what bothers Jack the most, because it’s what makes him flush and cross his arms. Pathetic.

“If people started listening to me, we’d win more games,” he spits back.

“If you had useful things to say, people would listen to you,” Wondo replies, rolling his eyes.

“And if you treated people better,” Melissa puts in.

“So you’re saying you don’t want me to be team captain anymore,” Jack says, flustered. “That’s what this is.”

Patrick looks at Jeff, who nods at him. “We’re kicking you off the team entirely,” Patrick says. Jack swivels to look at him again.

“And who’s gonna replace me? You?”

“We’ll vote on that,” Jeff says.

“But I’m not much of a pitcher,” Patrick says, smiling. Then, because he can’t resist, he adds, “But I think it won’t be that hard to find someone to take your place.”

There’s more yelling, and more sputtering, after that, but Jack’s fists don’t start punching, and after a while he storms off with a promise to join some other team and seek his revenge.

“That’s fine,” Jeff says. “Go for it.”

“God speed,” Melissa adds.

Jack throws down his team hat as he goes, which startles Patrick, because it’s what he did to sell the fake fight that he and Ronnie staged. It had seemed so over the top, at the time, but Patrick guesses it was believable after all.

“So dramatic,” he says, shaking his head. Jeff side-eyes him.

“What do you think he’s gonna do when we stop him from joining any other teams?” Melissa asks.

Patrick tosses a ball into his glove, thoughtfully, watching Jack in the distance as he continues to storm to his car.

“Retaliate,” Jeff says.
His three-month gift for David is a novelty coffee mug he had printed, that says Happy Quarterly Anniversary on the side. He hands it over as soon as they get back to Ray’s that evening, gift-wrapped, and David glares at him the entire time he unwraps it.

“It’s also a useful reminder that we have to file quarterly taxes,” Patrick explains, innocently, once he gets it open.

David’s eyes narrow. His elegant hands set the mug down on the dresser gently, and then he crowds up into Patrick’s space, holding his biceps, kissing him roughly before trailing his mouth down Patrick’s neck, kissing and biting.

“How many times do I have to say it,” David breathes, turning him around, pinning him face-first against the wall, teeth scraping against his skin. Patrick shivers. “You’re tempting fate with these gifts.”

“Don’t think it’s fate I’m tempting,” Patrick says, on a breathy groan. David undoes Patrick’s jeans one handed and pushes them down his thighs with ruthless efficiency. Patrick scrabbles for the lube he had in his pocket and finally finds it, handing it back; David uses a lot of it as he gets his fingers inside, twisting and spreading him open. Patrick groans, pushes back against the pressure. “Yeah, fuck me, David, c’mon.”

David does, in and out with his fingers, until Patrick’s gritting his teeth with wanting more.

“I got you,” David says, quietly, taking his fingers out. “Gonna fuck you.”

Patrick feels obscenely wet, ass dripping as he tries to get himself braced against the wall.

“You know,” he says, conversationally, as David gets on a condom and lines up his cock, “you’re not really disincentivizing me from getting you gifts by fucking me hard up against a wall.”

A breathy laugh puffs across his neck as David enters him.

“In fact,” Patrick goes on, “some would say, oh, fuck, fuck, fuck! Oh. That’s good. David, oh—some would say that you’re giving me, unh, positive, uh, reinforcement—” he breaks off with a low groan as David slides all the way into him.

“You keep reminding me that we might break up tomorrow,” David says, biting the tendon of his neck where it meets his shoulder. “Can I help it if I want to make the most of today?”

“This. Is not. What breaking up. Looks like,” Patrick laughs, as David starts to fuck him hard.

“Good. Stay with me,” David says, in his ear. His voice sounds broken. The laughter drains out of Patrick’s lungs. In all their joking, David’s never said that before, never asked. He’s only offered to step out of the way graciously.

“Yeah, I—I’m gonna, David,” he says. “I’m gonna stay.”

“Yeah, you are,” David says, and fucks him harder.

* 

David, of course, reacts with horror to the entire open mic night idea when Patrick broaches it, but that’s to be expected. Patrick barrels forward with it anyway; David’s not the only one who’s occasionally allergic to compromise. And it’s the perfect way to tell David and the rest of this town what he’s been wanting to say, what he wants them all to know.
“Ronnie! I need a permit for an event tomorrow.”

Ronnie looks up from the papers on her desk. “Kinda short notice,” she says.

“I wanna hold an open mic night at the store. It’s the kind of event you’re always arguing for in Council, isn’t it? Get the town together, support local business . . .”

“Your business.”

“My local, economy-boosting business,” Patrick agrees.

“Fine,” Ronnie says, after a minute. “I’ll expedite it for you.”

“Which means . . . ?”

“I’ll fill out the form now instead of later.”


She licks her fingers and sorts through the forms in the basket in front of her, finally pulling one forward. Patrick makes a note to get her some of the little rubber thingies to help her flip the pages faster. “You said an open mic night? Will there be alcohol?”

“I was definitely hoping there would be, yes.”

“Charge a cover at the door. Gets you around the liquor license.” She looks up at him. “And boosts your profits.”

“Oh, that’s smart.”

“Uh-huh. So, who’s performing?”

“What?”

“You wanna get local people in the door, probably a good idea to give them an incentive.”

Patrick didn’t think about that. “Well, I am,” he says.


Just then, Bob jogs over to them from his desk. “Uh, Patrick, couldn’t help but overhear—you’re hosting an open mic night?”

Which is how Patrick gets his lineup started.

“You gonna come out tomorrow, Ronnie?” Patrick asks, once he’s done talking to Bob and convincing him to bring everyone he knows.

“Could be entertaining,” Ronnie says. “And I don’t have any other plans.”

Patrick nods, and Ronnie nods too, and then they’re both nodding for a while. Patrick kind of misses playing baseball with her once a week. He feels like he hasn’t seen her.

“I’m a little nervous, truth be told,” he says. He feels himself about to wrinkle the permit she gave him, by crumpling it in his hand; he carefully sticks it into his portfolio to save it from damage.

“I’ll be there,” Ronnie says, sighing. “But you should talk to Twyla. She knows everyone. She’ll get
the word out.”

On his way back from Town Hall, Patrick stops in at the café and talks to Twyla.

“Oh, sure, I’ll round up the crew,” she says. “You know, I almost never get to sing solo in front of an audience.”

“Then you’ll have your chance,” Patrick says. “Just do me a favour, and don’t be late.”

* 

Patrick really does consider singing an original song; the sweet, wistful one in E major that he’s been scribbling onto bits of paper keeps haunting him, and it’s possible he could get it ready in time. But he thinks David might run from the store and never be heard from again if Patrick does that, so he settles on the acoustic cover he’s been working on instead. It says everything he wants to say, everything he wants David and the rest of the town to hear.

He’s no Heath Ledger, but he hopes David will get the point anyway.

He practices, the night before, up in his room with the door closed. When he finishes the full version of the song for the first time, he hears clapping outside in the hall.

“Hi,” he says, yanking the door open to see Ray and Joon-ho standing in the hall.

“It sounded so pretty, we were helplessly drawn toward you,” Joon-ho says, smiling. “Is that what you’re playing at open mic tomorrow?”

“Yeah, I— I think so,” Patrick says. He frowns. “Was it, uh. Actually good?”

“It sounded delightful, Patrick,” Ray says. “And I don’t give such praise lightly. It was my insightful and honest critique that made my cousin give up the violin and become a dentist.”

“It sounded great,” Joon-ho puts in. “Like something that’s gonna get you kissed afterwards.” He considers, then adds, “Like. Kissed.”

Patrick rolls his eyes. “Thanks, Joon-ho, that’s. Nice.”

“Alas, I’m heading out of town for a conference tomorrow, so I’ll miss the actual performance,” Ray says.

Patrick frowns. “Oh yeah? I was hoping you’d be there, you know. In the front row. For support.”

“I can come tomorrow,” Joon-ho says. “I have a meeting with my new supervisor in the morning, but I can easily get back to Schitt’s Creek in time for this.”

“Really?” Patrick asks. He breathes out. “It’d mean a lot to me, to see you there. Especially if Ray can’t come.”

“Wouldn’t miss it,” Joon-ho says. “Also, listen, I’ve been working on some standup material, and I’m hoping for a good slot.”

“Check,” Patrick laughs.

* 

When Patrick gets up on the stage to play his song, the front row is Emily, and Twyla, and Ronnie,
and Jeff, and Joon-ho. Ronnie has a lot of drink tickets in her hand, but she’s there, and she’s listening. It makes him feel bold and confident, to have so many of his people here to support him.

He didn’t really anticipate how much it would feel like what he used to do in high school, how much it would take him back. He feels seventeen again, or like the person he would’ve liked to have been at seventeen, all his friends ready to cheer for him as he serenades his boyfriend. It’s a nice fantasy, where he found David years ago, where he never got engaged to Rachel, where he got to be himself from the start. He lets himself sink into it as he welcomes the crowd. It’s easy, like putting on an old pair of shoes he’d forgotten about, that fit him perfectly.

The song dedication part, though, will be new.

David is standing by the counter with his mother, looking nervous. Patrick doesn’t feel nervous. He looks again at the front row, and at David, and at the microphone in front of him, and he feels a wave of calm wash through him. He knows what he wants. He didn’t know at seventeen, but he knows now.

“I’d like to dedicate this first song to a very special someone in my life,” Patrick says, and watches as David tries not to look conspicuous even as he stands there, stunningly beautiful in his flame-coloured sweatshirt. It’s ridiculous that David would duck his head and fold his arms and try not to stand out; to Patrick, it’s like he has his own gravity. He can’t understand how anyone could look at a room like this and not immediately have their gaze drawn to David. He loves him; he loves him. He’s going to sing it instead of saying it, but the words are still inside him.

“David Rose,” Patrick adds, pointedly, getting his mouth a little too close to the mic to make the feedback whine. “There he is, right there. That’s him. Can’t miss him.”

The song feels good as he sings it. He lets his fingers go a little sloppy and twangy on the strings, trying to convey the messy, joyful way he feels inside. He lets himself put everything, everything he’s feeling, into the words.

He watches David’s face, and the faces of everyone in the front row, hoping they can hear what he’s saying. The moment feels right, complete, like he can hold the entire crowd inside this little bubble, bring them all inside the way he feels for David. *Just as long as I’m here in your arms I can be in no better place*, he sings, meaning it, willing everyone here to know it, too. Willing David to hear it, and understand that he means it.

David smiles, and tears up, and it’s exactly like one of those romcom scenes, but real, and intense, and happening to him and his boyfriend.

A lot of people clap and cheer, when he finishes. Patrick tries not to blush, and brings Twyla up to sing next. Once she starts, David pulls him physically into the backroom and kisses him hard.

“Oh, you liked it,” Patrick says, softly.

“No one’s ever—I’ve never—um. That was new. That was amazing. Thank you.” There are tears at the corners of his eyes.

Patrick kisses him again, because he wants David to be kissed, to be sung to, to be indulged. He wants him to feel as joyful and new as Patrick does, all the time.

“Um,” David says, a few seconds later, tearing his mouth away. “I think Twyla’s wrapping up?”

“Might be a long night.” Patrick’s thinking about the very long set list he spent most of yesterday afternoon putting together, plus all the people who might’ve just shown up.
“Go host, then,” David says. His eyes are still shining, but his mouth is twisted in a sweet grin. He slaps Patrick’s ass when he turns to go. Patrick turns to look at him, open mouthed in fake shock. David quirks his eyebrows at him.

“You know, Ray’s at a conference,” he says, walking backwards.

“Is he.”

“So you can show me your appreciation a little more later.”

Later, David does.

*

Rachel tries the random texts a couple more times before she texts him in earnest: We really should talk followed by Do you miss me? followed by I miss you. The time indices, all late at night, make him wonder if she’s drunk. Or maybe she’s just tired; tired and depressed, the way she gets sometimes at the end of long days, when she and Patrick used to have long, rambling conversations about their fears and doubts.

In the past, he’s sometimes successfully ignored the random letters and numbers gambit. He’s never successfully ignored her plain, honest statement, six months later, that she misses him. He can’t do it now, either, can’t let her go on believing that she has a chance. He thinks it over all day, while working the store with David, while David kisses him his hellos and goodbyes, and then he makes an excuse and goes home by himself. He sits down on the edge of his bed, wipes his palms on his jeans, and types.

I’m doing good where I am now, he texts back. I miss you but only as a friend.

Rachel: Then let’s talk. As friends.

Patrick: I think that’s a bad idea.

There are a lot of other things he could text: I’m seeing someone or I don’t want you or I’m gay, as it turns out. He doesn’t text any of those things. She’s part of the life he left behind. He’s the new version of himself, here, and he likes who he is. Rachel only knows who he was, not who he is, and Patrick had made a clean break with that version of himself.

As clean as he could, anyway. He wishes it wouldn’t keep getting messy like this.

Patrick: We can’t go back to what we were. I’m sorry for what I did to you. Goodbye.

Then he throws his phone on the bed and leans forward, pressing the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. That way, he can’t feel if he’s crying or not.

He hears his phone beep again.

*

Patrick tries to put Rachel out of his mind, to focus on the present, on his new life, on New Patrick. A few days later, he’s mostly succeeding, and it’s the furthest thing from his thoughts when he picks up the store phone.

“Rose Apothecary, how can I help you?” Patrick says, absentmindedly.
“Hi sweetheart!” Patrick almost drops the phone; it’s his mother’s voice on the end of the line.

“Hi, Mom.” He starts thinking about what would happen if David had answered. What she might’ve said to David, or what David might’ve said back. He’s glad David’s out running errands.

“What—why are you calling here?”

“Well, honey, you haven’t been answering my texts, and I tried calling your phone and it went right to voicemail, so I thought—”

“Mom. I’m working.” Patrick feels a quiet ball of fear in his belly, rolling hot and slow, spiderwebbing out into annoyance and anger that he knows, he knows is out of proportion.

“Is it busy? Should I call back later?”

There aren’t any customers in the store at the moment. Patrick really wants to lie and say that there are.

“Now is fine,” he says, strangled. “But you shouldn’t call me at work.”

“Rachel called me yesterday,” his mom says. “I needed to talk to you.”

He takes a breath. “Okay.”

There’s silence for a few seconds, enough that Patrick almost speaks again, to see if she’s still there.

“Patrick. She really misses you. She says she’s been reaching out but you won’t even talk to her.”

“It’s been six months,” Patrick says. “She needs to move on with her life.”

“I guess—honey, none of us really understand why you left. You wouldn’t tell us. And you’ve started a whole new life there, in Schitt’s Creek, but—”

“I didn’t tell you I was in Schitt’s Creek,” Patrick interrupts, panicking.

“Well, I looked up your store online. Patrick, it’s not wrong for a mother to want to know where her son is living!”

“No. I know.” He bends over the counter. He wishes it weren’t the midafternoon lull. He wishes he had an escape hatch from this conversation. He wishes David were here, to touch his shoulder, butterfly-light and hesitant, while he deals with this. He’s glad David’s not here to see this.

It occurs to him that he has to get this conversation over with, now, before David comes back.

“It wasn’t really a secret. I just—I need this time. To myself.”

“How much more time do you need, darling? Like you said, it’s been six months.”

“I’m not—Rachel and I are not going to get back together, Mom. Okay? I know it’s happened in the past but it’s not gonna happen again.”

There’s another silence, and then his mom asks, “Did she cheat on you?”

“What? No!”

“You cheated on her, then. I asked her, but she wouldn’t say. Patrick? Was that it?”
The thought crosses his mind, for a moment, that his mom might think that his relationship with David is cheating. That he ran away from his fiancé and has been lying and having a secret relationship, a secret gay relationship, the whole time. He shakes that idea away. He broke up with Rachel before he left. He’s free to be who he wants to be, here. He’s been more honest here than he’s ever been in his life before.

He doesn’t know if his mom would see it that way at all.

“No, Mom, I didn’t. It just doesn’t work out, sometimes.”

I’m gay I’m gay I’m gay, he could say it, he could. He can’t. Not over the phone. Not when he can’t see her face, can’t watch her for her reaction.

“Well. Honey. You know I only want you to be happy.”

“I know,” Patrick agrees. He’s trying not to cry; he’s at work; he can’t cry at work.

“If it wasn’t right with Rachel, then that’s okay. But we just—we miss you, around here.”

“I know. I miss you too.”

There’s the sound of her sigh, over the phone. It’s so familiar, that little disappointed breath. He hates hearing it, wants to make her happy so she doesn’t make that sound. “What do you want me to tell Rachel?”

“Tell her I hope she finds someone who treats her better.”

“Oh, sweetheart.”

The tone in her voice, full of love and empathy, is enough to make him able to lie to her. “I gotta—Mom, there are customers, I gotta go.”

“All right,” his mother says, softly. “Call me again soon.”

“I will,” he promises. He hopes he doesn’t break that promise.

By the time David gets back, there really are customers in the store, and Patrick’s eyes aren’t red anymore, so he jumps in to help and doesn’t notice anything wrong.

*  

“It’s the LGBTQ2AI-plus night again tonight,” Patrick says, trying to be casual about it, as he works his way through the sales spreadsheet. The things they move the most of aren’t necessarily the things with the best markup, and he’s wondering if he can convince David to rearrange some displays—in the correct way, of course—to make the more profitable items more visible.

“Oh. That’s . . . nice,” David says. He’s drawing something in his journal, something full of big, swooping lines; Patrick would criticize him for doodling on the job, but the last time he did that, it turned out David was diagramming vendor supply chain timelines.

He frowns. He hasn’t brought up the shindig the last couple of months, beyond telling David that he was going, but he does still want to share it with him, to feel what it’s like to have David on his arm at one of them.

“I was wondering if you’d like to come with me.”
David looks up at him, hmph-ing low in his chest. “Isn’t it really . . . your time, though? To explore your own identity? I wouldn’t want to step on that.”

For a moment, Patrick considers that this could be David’s real objection to going. “I would like it if you joined me,” he says, slowly, to be clear. David puts down his fancy pen and comes over to him; Patrick obligingly saves his work and closes his laptop.

“I have just never been, really, all that . . . interested? In that kind of community? It’s not my scene. Is all.”

Patrick tries to think this through, tries to think about how it would be for someone whose parents assumed he was gay from a young age, who went to a performing arts boarding school, who lived and worked with artists in New York.

“Didn’t you ever—didn’t you ever want people around you? Who got it?” He wants to be more specific, wants to name what that community has done for him, but the feeling is too big to put into words.

“I never really cared about labels?” David says, doing a smile-grimace that, in this instance, Patrick doesn’t find charming at all. “It wasn’t—no one around me really made a big deal about it. I’m sorry if you—if it was, if people around you were—”

“I don’t come from some homophobic hick town, David, Jesus.” He knows he’s being louder than he wants to be.

“Well, good,” David says, almost yelling. He softens his voice immediately. “That’s good. I’m glad about that.”

It’s ten minutes to close, and Patrick desperately doesn’t want another customer to come in. He walks to the door, turns the deadbolt, and flips the sign, which makes David raise his eyebrows.

“I guess you’ve had it, your whole life. I guess I haven’t. I guess I still need it.” It makes Patrick feel stupid, behind the curve, a guy who was too slow to realize he was gay until his thirties and still needs to hear about it, to think about it. He should be past all this, like David is, he guesses, but he’s not, and it’s important to him, and he wants it.

“Look,” David says, slowly, and there’s something low and dangerous in his tone. “We all have—it’s the same world you grew up in, okay? We all have, have the same shit to deal with and dads who disapprove and it’s not a problem for me if you go, I don’t have a problem with it, I don’t get why you can’t just go and enjoy yourself without me—”

“Your dad doesn’t disapprove of you,” Patrick says, automatically, which he realizes is a mistake as soon as he sees the answering look on David’s face.

“Anymore,” David says, shortly. There’s an entire world of history behind that one word, and Patrick feels ignorant, that he didn’t know it, didn’t see it before now.

“I’m sorry,” he says, like a reflex, like a part of his breath. “I didn’t—I’m sorry.”

He thinks about his own dad. He doesn’t know if his dad would disapprove. His dad once saw some story on the news about a gay celebrity—Ellen, maybe, or Rupert Everett—and shook his head, and said isn’t life hard enough, and it stuck with him, that one phrase, that one idea, that life was hard enough without being gay. That his dad saw it that way.

David blows out a breath, then walks the four steps over to where Patrick is standing. “It’s okay,” he
says, softly. He’s standing in front of Patrick now, but not touching him. His hands are in front of him, one hand clutching anxiously at the fingers of the other. Patrick knows that move; he recognizes that move; he wants to comfort David until he stops doing it.

“I get a lot out of it,” Patrick says instead, softly, stubbornly. “I think you could too.”

“Well. I don’t—I don’t think I would,” David says, a lot more gently now.

“Why not?” Patrick wants to answer on David’s behalf: because it’s tacky, because it’s simple, because it’s not hidden behind five layers of ironic distance. He wants it to be like the open mic night again, where he can push David past his reticence just by being sincere.

“Because—I don’t identify that way,” David says, at last, and it sounds like he has to drag every word out of himself. “I want to support you. I want you to have a good experience. I want you to have friends who help you. But I never—that’s not me.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, voice shuddering, and finally breaks the distance between them, gathering David up against him. “Okay, David.”

David’s arms come around him immediately. “I don’t want to fight,” he says, sounding choked up. “I want you to be happy.”

“I am happy,” Patrick says, and it’s true, it’s mostly true. “I’m happy with you.”

For a long time, David doesn’t answer this, face pressed down against Patrick’s neck. Then he says, “Me too.”

“I’m still going to the thing tonight, though. It’s at my friend Ben’s house.”

“I hope you have fun,” David says, into his collar, breath warm and wet. “I hope you have a really good time at your friend Ben’s house, Patrick.”


At Ben’s house, everyone still asks after David, but this time Patrick finds it easier to tell them no, David’s not here.

*

David texts him that night, after Patrick’s already in bed and just about to put his phone on the nightstand.

David: Did you have a good time at Ben’s house?

Patrick smiles down at the message, pleasantly surprised.

Patrick: Yeah, it was a good night. Ben’s housemate is a musician, so a bunch of us had a jam session.

David: I’m dating someone who says jam session
David: It’s okay, I’ll get past it, give me a minute
David: Did you sing?

Patrick: Yeah
Patrick: Not your song tho
There’s a long pause before David texts him back again.

David: Well I should hope not
David: I’m sorry I missed more of your musical talents

Patrick wants to text then you should’ve come! He holds himself back. He tries to get to the heart of the feeling he’s having about it, instead.

Patrick: I thought about you while I was singing

David: I thought about you all night
David: Not in a sexy way
David: Well, okay, also in a sexy way, I miss you, we haven’t fucked in days
David: But also I just thought about you

The texts all roll in fast, one after another, making Patrick chuckle. The light of his phone feels like a beacon in the dark.

Patrick: My thoughts about you were also both sexy and non-sexy

David: So what was the theme from the hat tonight?

Patrick’s surprised; he thought David might take this in more of a sexting direction. He licks his lips.

Patrick: oh you would’ve hated it, it was about kids, all the parents had a field day
Patrick: it’s actually why I ended up doing the jam session instead

David: Oh

A long pause, with the dots on David’s side showing up and leaving a few times before another text comes through.

David: So tell me about the rest of the night. Who was there?

Patrick settles down against his pillow, smiling, and he tells David about the music, and about the conversations, and about everyone he got to see and catch up with. He tells him the story about Alice’s ongoing attempts to adopt a shelter dog, and the one about Ben’s latest breakup with the tragically shallow swimming instructor, and the one about Twyla and Denise trying to do a drinking contest but getting too distracted telling each other ridiculous rambling stories about drinking to actually remember to drink. He’s hesitant at first, sending short snippets, assuming that David’s only asking to be polite, but David keeps replying with real questions and reaction-face-emojis, and after a while Patrick gets that he actually wants to know, actually wants to hear this for some reason. They end up texting for a long time, and Patrick’s the one who has to call an end to it..

Patrick: Okay we should really get to sleep if we’re going to open the store on time tomorrow
Patrick: Thanks for listening

David: Thanks for telling me
David: I like hearing about your day

Patrick’s chest clenches, heartsore with love for him.

Patrick: Goodnight, David
**David:** Goodnight, Patrick

*

For their next anniversary, Patrick has a cookie that says *4 Months!!!* delivered to the motel. David stalks into the store later that day with the simultaneously pleased and annoyed look on his face that say his exasperation has been softened by eating a bunch of the cookie.

“It's a cookie, David,” Patrick says, “what's the big deal?”

“First of all, a cookie is always a big deal, especially when that cookie just alerted my entire family to the fact that this is officially the longest relationship I've ever had.”

David starts the sentence off with confidence, but towards the end he turns to look at the products on the table instead, fiddling. Patrick feels a grin coming over his face; it's so rare that he has experience that David doesn't, but this is one of those times. Not that his tendency to just grimly go along with relationships until they eventually withered or imploded really worked out well for him in the past, but hell. He dated *Michelle* for longer than four months.

“This is the longest relationship you’ve ever had? I should’ve gotten you more than a cookie.”

“Okay. Well. The cookie was almost too much. Figuratively speaking, I ate half of it on the way here. Bottom line? I just don’t think we need to celebrate, as much. You know, we could just go day to day like normal people. If we throw a, if we throw a renaissance fair, every month, I just feel like we might be tempting fate.”

About halfway through the speech Patrick starts to see David go off the rails, and comes around the counter so he can put his hands on his shoulders. David’s shoulders immediately relax under his touch, and Patrick loves that, loves the held breath that David blows out as soon as Patrick holds him.

“We are not tempting fate, okay?” Patrick doesn’t know how many times he has to say it, but he’ll do it, he’ll keep saying it, in the face of David’s anxiety and hesitation and stories about birthday clowns who disappear in the night, because he can’t believe it’s true.

Nothing in his life has ever felt so much like fate as meeting David. If there is such a thing as fate, it wants them together. He kisses David’s cheek and tells him he has nothing to worry about.

*

Town Hall is mostly empty, Ronnie puttering with some files in the back room and Mrs Rose at her desk.

“Well, hello, Patrick!” Mrs Rose says, giving each word in the sentence at least one more syllable than she needs to. He smiles. Her elocution is the opposite of David’s quick, barreling-forward way of speaking, but it’s also kind of the same, in that it’s about fitting as much of herself into the sentence as possible.

“Hi, Mrs Rose. I’m just getting the permit renewals for the store, thought you could give me some signatures.”

She takes the documents from his hands with an elegant, imperious little gesture that also reminds him of David. “Lovely. And how is the store?”

“Doing well. Our sales projections show us turning a profit by Christmas.”
“Well. That sounds dire, but given your surprisingly upbeat delivery of this information, I’ll just assume that’s positive news, then,” she says, smiling. “And how is David?”

Patrick doesn’t know how to answer that one. Doesn’t she see David all the time? “He’s fine,” he says, temporizing. Mrs Rose’s gaze is penetrating and distracted at the same time, somehow, like she can see into him but chooses to see past him.

“I assume, not having heard contradictory tidings, that you and my first-born are still . . .” she trails off meaningfully, with an aristocratic wave of her hand. Oh. It’s the same way Mr Rose had put it. Patrick answers it the same way.

“Dating. Yes.” He wants to fidget, but holds himself back. Mrs Rose’s attention isn’t easily borne.

“How splendid. Yes. I was there to witness your exquisite little ditty in praise of our David. I must admit, I have never seen an admirer of his pin such a beating and bloody heart to their sleeve!”

“Is that what I did?” Patrick asks. It does sound pretty accurate, in fairness, but he wouldn’t have necessarily put it that way.

“Mmm,” Mrs Rose says, in the same way her son does, knowingly, thoughtfully. It’s disarming. “So tell me, Patrick. Will you be joining us for our rustic country provender this evening?”

“What?” Patrick asks. Mrs Rose proceeds to tell him, using a lot of words that Patrick has to run through a translation program in his brain, that there’s a barbecue planned for tonight, to which he was invited. As David’s boyfriend. It makes him feel warm, thrilled, a little nervous, to hear it, to hear that David’s family has been talking about him in approving tones, wanting to get to know him better. Even if David completely resisted their attempts to include him.

Mrs Rose’s smile is warm, in its way. Welcoming. She jokes with him, and Patrick gets comfortable enough to joke back, liking that he can make her laugh. He starts to understand David a little better, just in the minutes he spends with her, David’s desire to please her. A conversation with Moira Rose feels like an obstacle course, and Patrick’s always liked a challenge.

“I don’t know if David wants me to come, though,” he says, seriously. “He told me he was busy tonight with a family thing, that he couldn’t see me.”

Mrs Rose frowns theatrically. “I’m sure that’s our David, attempting to keep the various threads of his life separate. He did for so long, you know.”

“I know,” Patrick says, feeling that division, that separation, in his bones. He tries not to think about his conversations with his own mother. “He doesn’t like anyone knowing him too well. He gets scared.”

Blinking in brief surprise, Mrs Rose’s mouth falls open, then shuts again. “Yes,” she says, eventually. “Yes, that is insightful.”

“I don’t want to make him uncomfortable,” Patrick continues. “But do you think I should come anyway?”

At this, Mrs Rose clearly rallies, gathering her smile around her like armor. “Do you know, Patrick, I think I do,” she says, definitively. “David does not always make the brave choice on his own.”

Patrick thinks about David’s choices to lease the general store, to create an entirely new business model, to kiss Patrick on the mouth on his birthday. He figures a good relationship is one where you’re brave for each other, when you need each other to be. He says, “I guess I’ll see you tonight,
then. Maybe I’ll bring my guitar.”

“Indeed?” Mrs Rose asks, eyebrows raising. God, David is so much her son that it hurts to watch. Patrick loves her, and is annoyed by her, entirely by association.

“I mean, in case there’s a spontaneous need for a group singalong,” he adds, just as deadpan as he would deliver that same line to David. Mrs Rose quirks her lips.

“Quite so. You are very much the boy scout, I see, young Patrick.”

“I was,” Patrick acknowledges, because he was.

“Perhaps we could do a little duet of some kind for David. To really make him feel the warm and supportive embrace of those who care for him.” Her eyes are sparkling. Patrick grins.

“You would do that for him?”

“After resisting your inclusion in our little georgic little get-together, David would surely appreciate such a gesture, don’t you think?” She’s swinging her knee, just gently, where her legs are crossed, betraying the joke.

“I think so.” He breaks, laughing. Mrs Rose remains very nearly deadpan, except for the smile around the edges of her mouth.

David comes in, stomping up towards them at Mrs Rose’s desk.

“I hope so,” Mrs Rose says. “It would only be fair. Please tell me yes.”

Stopping before them, David demands their attention. “Uh. Hi.”

“David! Someone’s ears must be aflame.”

It’s fun to team up with Mrs Rose to give David a hard time, though it means that David lands at his earlier flustered _we’re tempting fate_ face again. This time, Patrick leaves Mrs Rose to talk him down, though not before he gives him a little smack on the ass with his portfolio, to remind him to take things less seriously.

* 

He gets another text from Rachel as he walks back to the store.

**Rachel:** I talked to your mom. She said you wanted me to move on with my life.

He stares at it for a while, wondering whether he should engage. He doesn’t want to. He doesn’t want anything of what he used to be intruding on this day, when he gets to spend more time with his boyfriend’s strange, wonderful family and celebrate their four-month anniversary.

**Patrick:** Yes.

**Rachel:** What if I came to see you? We could talk this all out in person.

A cold thrill of fear runs through him at that. He thinks about his mother, how she could easily have told Rachel where he was living without thinking anything of it.

It’s a long drive, though. Surely Rachel won’t make that long drive if he tells her no.
Patrick: It wouldn’t make any difference. I’m sorry. I’m really sorry, Rach. I don’t want you to come here.

She doesn’t text back.

David comes back in, and seems a little more calm, and kisses him softly. “All right, you are invited to the barbecue,” David says. Patrick smiles.

“I think technically I already was. Your mother invited me.”

“Well, if you’d prefer to go as my mother’s guest . . .”

“Oh, will it affect the seating chart if I do? Or just how the butler will announce us when we arrive?”

David frowns at him dramatically. Patrick laughs, and kisses his temple, and goes to get more of the maple candies from the back; they’re a big hit with the kids who are sometimes forced into the store by their parents.

His phone beeps. He pulls it out, taking a deep breath before reading.

Rachel: Okay. I understand. I can respect that. If you do want to talk in the future, just to talk it out, call me.

Patrick breathes a sigh of relief, looking down at his phone. It feels like finally, finally closing that chapter of his life. He can put it behind him, can live here and be himself here and figure it all out without this weight hanging over him.

He whistles for the rest of the day, which makes David look at him, amused and knowing. Patrick finds he doesn’t mind being known.

*

During the afternoon, Patrick plans out things to say at the Rose family barbecue. He’ll tell Mrs Rose that she looks stunning, and maybe offer his hand to lead her to the table. He’ll ask Alexis about her marketing course, and talk to her about her class projects. And he thinks it’s the right time, finally, to drop the story of him working at Rose Video as a teenager, where the whole family, but especially Mr Rose, can appreciate it. He gets a little nervous beforehand, finding himself going over sentences in his head over and over: he really wants to impress them.

He really wants David’s family to like him. He fits in here, and he wants to fit in with them, too.

It’s a beautiful day, unseasonably warm for October, and he sits around a picnic table with his boyfriend’s family, and Mr Rose proposes a toast to relationships, by which he means, in part, the relationship he and David have together. He catches David’s eye, pleased, and sees that David is pleased too, and he can’t imagine anything more perfect.

Which is when Rachel shows up.

*

He goes after David, when he gets up from the picnic table; there’s no part of his body that doesn’t need to follow him, trail after him, like a moon thrown suddenly out of orbit. He follows David to his room like it’s a physical need.

Once they get there, he tries to tell David everything, tries to explain.
He winces at David’s reaction to the confession that Rachel has been texting him during the last few months. If he’d told him, if he’d talked about it . . . but he wanted a clean break. He didn’t want to be that person with David.

David makes it painfully clear that by doing that, Patrick has screwed it all up.

“You stood in front of me and told me to trust people,” David says.

“I know.” Patrick feels like a pit is opening beneath him, like he’s being sucked down, crushed by the weight of all the fucking stupid mistakes he’s made.

He listens to David point out exactly how wrong he was, and he has to stand, has to take action; he can’t just sit and let this happen.

If nothing else, he has to make sure that David knows why, that David knows how he feels. If David’s going to break up with him, he’s going to make damn sure that it’s with the knowledge that he’s changed Patrick’s life.

Words come spilling out of his mouth without any filters, all of his raw emotion, everything he’s felt over the last four months. He doesn’t even know what he’s saying, for half of it, as tears come to his eyes, and all he wants is to take David in his arms, to kiss him until he smiles, the way he’s always been able to do before, when David was upset or annoyed.

“You make me feel right, David,” he says, finally.

For a moment, when David makes a joke about the Downton Abbey Christmas Special, he thinks it might be enough.

“It’s the truth,” he says, softly.

“I know. Um. But my truth? Is that I am . . . damaged goods. And this has really messed things up, for me. And I think I need some time with it.”

Patrick wants to argue with that, to tell David he’s not damaged, to tell David that he’s beautiful and whole and all Patrick needs. But there’s no way he could say that, not when he’s now one of the people responsible for damaging him. He might as well be Sebastien Raine or a disappearing birthday clown. Just another asshole in a long line of people who’ve let David down.

“All right,” he says, instead. David asks him to get him some food, so he does, not making eye contact with the Roses or Stevie. Rachel is still standing there, talking to a wide-eyed Alexis, and both of them shoot him nervous glances while he loads up a plate. He makes sure to get only medium-rare sliders, and to keep the chips far away from the wet potato salad so they don’t get soggy.

“S’for David,” Patrick says, unable to bear their eyes on him. David’s mother hands him the ketchup, silently. He doesn’t look at her, but forces himself to mutter a quiet thanks while he takes it. He squirts a pool of ketchup right at the edge of the plate where it won’t combine with anything but the sliders.

He delivers it, finding his chest heaving with his breath, as if he’s been running up a steep slope. David doesn’t look at him while he takes it.

Patrick has an absurd, pathetic urge to say I love you as he hands the plate over. But he’s said that, hasn’t he? When he sang to him, and on their three-month anniversary when he said he’d stay, and just now, with what he said in the motel room, hasn’t he made himself clear? And what difference
does it make if he does love David, anyway? He still hurt him. It’s not enough.

That’s the thing the romcoms don’t tell you, that love on its own isn’t enough. Patrick wouldn’t have thought it was, before David, wouldn’t ever have been that starry-eyed, but the way David has made him feel over the last few months made him think that maybe those kinds of miracles were possible. He was caught up in it, in that new and beautiful feeling, and didn’t realize that it was too delicate to carry all this weight on its own.

“Um. Thanks,” David murmurs.

“I’ll cover the store,” Patrick blurts out, letting his mind land on practical things. Real things, concrete things, that he can do, that he can handle. If David needs time, they can’t work together. “For as long as you need.”

“Okay,” David says. He looks at Patrick for a long moment, flimsy paper plate in his hands dripping ketchup onto his fingers. Patrick wants him to say more, to keep this moment alive, so that Patrick doesn’t have to face the next moment, when David is no longer talking to him.

David closes the door.

Patrick can’t quite find a deep breath, but tries to take one anyway, shuddering through it.

* 

Rachel sits with him in her motel room. He said they have a lot to talk about, but now he’s not sure what he wanted to say. Don’t come here, stop asking me, go away, except he doesn’t think she needs to be told any of that, not anymore. Not now that she’s seen—she’s seen him. And David. She knows; it feels like an avalanche and a clear blue sky at the same time: she knows.

He thinks of other things to say. I’m sorry, maybe. Did he even say those words to David? Did he even apologize? He can’t remember. He wonders if he can text him later, if David would be okay with him texting.

He thinks about all the time Rachel has spent texting him, and getting no response. He hasn’t been good to her.

“I asked you not to come,” he says, even though it’s pretty clear that she was already here when he told her that.

“You did,” she says. “Um. So. Alexis said you’re dating her brother. That guy who left? That’s your—”

“Yeah,” he interrupts. He doesn’t want her to say the word. He never wanted his ghost, the person he used to be, to come here, to infect the life he’s built here for himself. He was stupid, thinking he could just go on being this happy forever.

“I’m guessing your mom doesn’t know about him,” Rachel says. Patrick feels his stomach turn over. He hasn’t had any dinner yet, either, the hunger and the anxiety pulling his insides in two directions. He almost wishes he had eaten, so he could throw something up.

“No,” Patrick says. He rubs at the crease of his jeans. There’s a pull in the fabric, a loose thread. He shouldn’t pick at it.

“Did you ever—with me, was it ever—”
Her voice is so shaky that he has to look up at her, then, has to let himself feel the compassion for her that he’s been shoving ruthlessly aside for six months. He knows what she’s asking.

“I loved you,” he says, honestly. Then, watching her purse her lips, remembering how she could always wait him out, he adds the rest of it: “But it wasn’t right. It’s not the same.”

“As how you feel for this guy.”

“David,” Patrick says, frowning at the idea of David Rose being this guy to anyone.

“David. Okay.” She blows out a breath. “Why the hell didn’t you just tell me?”

It’s not said without empathy, but it’s also not without anger. Patrick would be angry too, in her place.

“I—it was—hard,” he grits out. “It was hard to come here, and start over, and, and realize—what I had to realize. About myself. I didn’t—I didn’t want—” he takes a shaky breath and tries to get it under control.

He’s reminded, viscerally, of the night he called off their engagement. He remembers her saying that he didn’t have any right to cry. It was true then, and it’s true now. He tells himself to get it the fuck together, and tries again.

“I was afraid. I wanted to be something new, here. To be honest with myself, for once. And it felt like, if I talked to you, if I told you—everything I’ve built here would all come crashing down.”

“Patrick. For fuck’s sake. I would’ve told you to have a nice life.”

“I know,” he says. It seems stupid, in retrospect. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t about you.”

“Sure feels like it’s about me. A little.”

“Yeah.” He swallows. “I’m sorry.”

“You said.”

He tries to think of something else to say, some other way to explain it. How the freedom from expectations had felt, when he’d first arrived here. How he’d gathered a community that only knew him as the new version of himself. How he felt fragile, and real, and growing, for the first time. How he didn’t want anything to get in the way of that feeling, that growth.

“You always were bad at doing things for yourself,” Rachel says, after a minute. “I guess you finally did something. All at once.”

Patrick bites his lip. “I wish I hadn’t fucked it up so bad.”

“Is that—is David going to . . .” she trails off, maybe not wanting to say break up with you or even forgive you. Patrick shakes his head, not to say no, just to say he has no idea.

He’s trying not to think about it too much, what his life here would be without David. He wouldn’t go back to trying to be straight, now, but he doesn’t know if he could stay here in town. Work at the store. See David every day, and not touch him.

He could go back to working out of Ray’s, maybe. Try dating Ben. His stomach rolls again.

“He said he needs some time.”
“You didn’t tell him about me either, huh.”

Patrick doesn’t need to answer that. She knows.

“Okay, well.” She claps her hands on her thighs, then stands up, still as efficient and practical as she always was. “Guess there’s not much more to say.”

Patrick nods, and stands with her. “I could—pay for your gas. For the trip,” he says. “And cover your motel room.”

“That’s okay. It was still nice to see you. Even if you kind of need to get your shit together.” She looks him over, appraisingly. “I won’t tell your mom. That you’re . . .” she pauses, and waves a hand at him, waiting expectantly for him to fill in the appropriate description. He doesn’t say anything, so she sighs and finishes, “Dating David.”

Patrick purses his lips, angry at himself, angry at her for being so nice about it. The feeling is like a weight inside him, like concrete hardening in his chest, and he can’t let it go at that, he can’t.

“I’m gay,” he brings himself to say, finally, to say the word to her. Days and months and years too late, but he says it.

“Okay,” she agrees, meeting his eyes, a sad smile on her lips. “That’s . . . that’s good. I won’t tell anyone you’re gay, Patrick.”

She doesn’t say but you should tell them, and Patrick knows it’s because she’s trying to be polite.

He loved her for so long. She knows so much about him. It’s weird for her to be polite to him. But he’s the one who made them strangers.

“Thanks,” he says, and leaves.

* *

He does text David. He texts him a lot. He texts I’m sorry I didn’t tell you and I will wait as long as you need and Please let me know if you want to talk. After the first glut of them, he forces himself to calm down, to give David more space, but he finds himself checking his phone more and more obsessively, and always ends up texting him at least once or twice a day. He tries, he tries to keep it gentle, respectful, not to text I miss you, not to text I love you, not to text Please talk to me. It’s not lost on him that he received a lot of texts like that from Rachel.

In the evenings, he tries to stay busy, working on business plans for the store for months from now, years from now. Planning futures. It feels desolate to do when he has no idea if he’ll be here, if David will be working with him. When he gets tired of that, he flicks to the picture of him and David that he has saved on his cell phone, of the two of them standing together in front of Ray’s bathroom mirror, David with his shirt off, Patrick kissing his jaw, both of them happy.

When he can’t look at the picture anymore, he goes back to the business plans.

Ray picks up on Patrick’s mood pretty quickly, and Patrick finds himself spilling the whole terrible story out to him, the day after it happens.

Ray frowns. “Want me to talk to him for you?”

Patrick laughs, scrubbing a hand over his face. It’s a sweet offer, the equivalent of what Patrick did for him when he and Joon-ho were broken up, but he can’t imagine any possible scenario in which
Ray talking to David about their relationship . . . issues would lead to any positive outcomes.

“No. Thank you, Ray.”

“Or I could ask Joon-ho to do it.”

Patrick considers this, but ultimately rejects it, for the same reason. “No.”

Ray sighs. “We could watch a movie, then? Play a game of cribbage?”

Ray is really terrible at cribbage, always missing points for some of his fifteen-twos and never remembering to count one for the Jack. If Patrick’s grandfather were still alive, Ray’s the kind of player he’d mulligan to death and gloat about beating. Patrick always gently points out the stuff he’s missed and lets him take the points, because there’s competitive spirit and then there’s being a dick.

“No,” Patrick says, irritably. He doesn’t want to sit and waste time, to be passive. Wait for the hours to tick by, fill them up with nothing just to make them disappear. He can’t bear it.

“Hm. Want to reorganize some closets?” Ray asks.

Relief floods through him. “Yes, please,” Patrick says, softly.

Really, all the closets in the house are still plenty organized from the time when Ray and Joon-ho were broken up, so he and Ray end up cleaning out the kitchen cupboards and the fridge instead, wiping everything down and applying new contact paper. Ray chats away the whole time, telling him about photo shoots he’s doing, about the pros and cons of various retail properties he’s currently listing, about his poker nights at Bob’s.

Mr Rose goes to Bob’s poker nights, Patrick knows, but Ray doesn’t mention him once, in all the stories.

“Thanks, Ray,” Patrick says, when they have the kitchen entirely spotless and flawlessly organized.

Ray hugs him, squishes him tightly. Patrick hates it at first, how vulnerable he is in Ray’s eyes, and he almost gets angry at it, almost squirms out of it, almost pushes Ray, hard, away from him. But then he lets out a breath and sinks into it instead, letting his head rest on Ray’s shoulder for a moment.

“I’ll have Joon-ho come over tomorrow. We can all do the basement.”

“All right,” Patrick agrees, into Ray’s polo shirt.

*

Heading out of town with Stevie today, David texts him, the next morning. Patrick’s so stunned by the presence of a text on David’s side of the text chain that he almost doesn’t parse it for a moment. You still okay to handle the store?

Yes, he texts back, immediately. He chews his lip. Can I ask where you’re going?

There’s a pause, but then there are dots to show David is typing, and Patrick’s heart leaps up to his throat.

David: Stevie’s currently driving me to a spa. Crystal Elms. In Elmdale. It’s supposed to be very nice.
It’s strangely unemphatic and unopinionated, for a text from David about . . . well, about anything, but especially about a spa. Patrick realizes, with a shock like cold water, that David’s being polite to him, too. Like Rachel was.

In a way, it hurts more than silence. David’s rarely polite. It’s part of the same thing where he’s often kind, and usually good, but never really nice.

**Patrick:** That’s good. Have a good time.

He finds the spa online, looks at pictures of the rooms and facilities, imagines David and Stevie in those rooms, in that restaurant, in that jacuzzi.

He’s never gone swimming with David, or to a hot tub. He’s never seen him in a swimsuit. It’s a bizarre thing to miss, but Patrick fixates on it for a while, one of the many things he never got to do with David.

The website has a form where you can submit an order for people staying at the hotel. Before Patrick knows what he’s doing, he’s clicking through to send them a bottle of wine.

*

All day every day at the store, Patrick smiles at customers and replenishes inventory and cleans. Some new hand-embroidered scarves come in, and he hesitates for at least two hours over where to put them. He doesn’t know where David wanted to put them. The time drags on, punctuated only by customers, some of whom have clearly heard about him and David, because they give Patrick sad, sympathetic looks. He smiles even harder at those people, willing them to stop.

He wonders who told who this particular gossip. Alexis, or Stevie, or David himself, maybe. Mrs Rose might’ve said something to Ronnie and Bob. Alexis would’ve confided in Twyla. He wonders if Ray is talking to people. It could be all of those, too many people to get angry at.

After they all clean out the basement together, Joon-ho starts coming by the store every couple days, even though he’s rarely in Schitt’s Creek that often during the week. He usually shows up with lunch, which is useful, because although Patrick packs himself a lunch carefully every morning, he seems to be forgetting to eat it sometimes.

“Trade you my coleslaw for your pickle,” Joon-ho says.

“What?” Patrick says. Joon-ho frowns, and does it himself, picking up Patrick’s pickle and leaving the little cup of coleslaw behind.

“Oh. Thanks. Sorry.” It’s true that he prefers the coleslaw to the pickles. It’s nice that Joon-ho knows that.

The bell rings, and Patrick moves to get up, but Joon-ho puts a hand on his shoulder. “I got it. You eat.”

Patrick feels stupid, like he shouldn’t be this weak, this obviously pathetic. He’s angry about it, somewhere deep inside, like he’s angry about the gossip, but doesn’t feel like he has enough energy for that anger to actually surface. Like bubbles on the bottom of a pot, not hot enough to come to a boil. He eats his sandwich and his coleslaw, because he can’t bear for Joon-ho to come back and see that he’s failed at that, too.

David texts him *Thank you for the wine*, which sends Patrick into a fury of online ordering. He sends David flowers. Chocolate. He wraps and sends over a bracelet that he bought for David weeks ago,
in Elmdale, noticing how well it matched the necklace he sometimes wears and thinking it would make a good Hannukah-or-possibly-Christmas present. Patrick wants to turn out his pockets and send David everything he has, give him everything and anything that might bring him home.

Even the store, which Patrick loves on its own, from its consignment-based business plan to its every little jar of cuticle toner, feels empty and lifeless without David in it. Which is absurd, in its way, since the store sings David’s presence in every detail. Patrick spends his days living and working inside David’s aesthetic, like he’s been trapped for his sins inside a David Rose mood board and can’t escape. At the same time, he wants nothing more than to keep it afloat, keep it running, keep it beautiful, as if tending the store is, in some small way, like tending to his relationship with David. It’s a giant, precarious, gorgeous manifestation of what they can do together, of how well they work together, and spending all his time there, by himself, is both an unpleasant reminder and a pleasant one, of what he’s lost, of what he wants back.

Five days after the barbecue, Patrick is meticulously washing the store windows for the second time that day when Ronnie shows up. Steven’s with her, and a guy Patrick doesn’t know, but thinks he might’ve seen at an LGBTQ2AI-plus night.

Ronnie’s wearing sweats and a hoodie, and has a bat over one shoulder. “Interleague pickup game,” she says. “Mandatory.”

Patrick huffs out a laugh in spite of himself, because it’s just like Ronnie to refuse to come up with a believable lie. “Oh really?” He glances at the guys behind her; neither of them has ever been to a softball game.

“Hey, Patrick,” Steven says.

“Steven owns a store in Elk Lake,” Ronnie says. “Menswear.”

“Anyone who likes suits wear, really,” Steven says. He comes around the counter, glancing over the till. “This is the same system we use. Anything in particular I need to know about how the items are categorized?”

“It’s on the price tags,” Patrick says, blinking. “There’s a—it’s a code.” Steven nods, looking over the codes on the screen.

“Makes sense. Do I have your number? I’ll text if I have questions. This should be straightforward, though. We can handle it.” He nods at the other guy, who comes up to the till.

“Hi,” he says. “I’m Derrick, I’m Steven’s boyfriend.” He reaches out and shakes Patrick’s hand. He’s got a killer smile, and he’s wearing a tank top that shows off really strong arms. Patrick hadn’t heard that Steven had a new boyfriend. That’s nice. He reminds himself that it’s nice for people to have boyfriends, that he should be happy about that kind of thing when it happens to other people.

He tries to say something normal.

“Derrick. Are you also a retail expert?”

“Uh, no. I’m a dance instructor. I teach out at Elmdale College, plus a bunch of the high schools around here. But I owe Ronnie a favour.”

“Check,” Patrick says, feeling a small smile creep over his face.

“So, rookie?” Ronnie says. She has a baseball in her hand, and she throws it up in the air and then catches it. “Whaddyasay?”
It feels good to run, to move his muscles with purpose and joy, to hear the crack of the bat, to feel the ball thock into his glove. Ronnie’s rounded up a few people, but it’s not enough for two teams, so they do it pickup style, with everyone in the field versus whoever’s at bat at the time. It takes Patrick back to the games he used to play, with his friends from high school. It’s what he always wanted those games to be, really, full of people who truly understood him.

“Thanks for doing this,” Patrick says to Ronnie, when they break for a beer.

“Well, it wasn’t just for you. Karen was driving me nuts with this renovation project she wants me to do on the house, and Candice,” she nods her head at Candice, who’s throwing the ball back and forth with Jeff, “needed a break from her kids, who have been sick at home all week. Jeff had a client from hell who put him through the wringer and made him replant every single tree in their backyard. Just felt like the whole town could use a breather, you know?”

“Huh,” Patrick says. He didn’t know that about Ronnie or Candice or Jeff. He’s been caught up in his own misery, not paying enough attention to what was going on with his friends. “Still. Thanks.”

“You can owe me one,” Ronnie says, which makes Patrick laugh.

Ronnie asks how it’s going with Jack, and Patrick grimaces. “I’m trying to make an official complaint with the Recreation Committee, but not making much headway. I’ve collected letters from everyone on the team talking about his behaviour, but no one will take my calls. I don’t want to just deliver the letters to the admin person and see them get filed away and forgotten.”

“You should talk to Denise,” Ronnie says. “Denise used to be on Recreation before she started her business. She knows everyone down there. Who to talk to if you want to actually get something done.”


“Get that asshole out of there as soon as you can, rookie. I hear from Candice it’s a lot worse than we thought.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. “I will.”

After the game, he talks to Candice, asks her about her kids. She smiles ruefully. “On the mend, now. It’s just good to get out of the house. Melissa’s babysitting for me.”

“Nice of her,” Patrick says.

“Nice of you and everyone to come out and play with me, take my mind off things,” Candice says. “Thanks.”

“It’s . . . my pleasure,” Patrick says, honestly.

*  

While he’s at the store the next day, Patrick spends his time on the phone with Denise, then on the phone with the woman at Recreation who Denise said was “the good one,” and then, finally, gets information on what’s required for the complaint and how to submit it. Making phone calls and getting things done is good, makes him feel good: he’s grateful he can take his mind off of David by doing something useful.

“This guy sounds like a real asshole,” the woman from Recreation, Valerie, says. “But look, if you want something to get done, you’ll have to follow up. Keep the pressure on. Come down to the
office every few days. Send in different players to complain individually. Maybe get Town Council on it. That way my boss will actually take it seriously.”

“Following up, I can do,” Patrick says.

He has a text from David that night: *Thank you for the chocolates.*

He replies: *I’m glad you liked them.*

* The way he and David get back together is . . . distracting. It’s distracting, first, because David is an asshole about it, holding out on talking to him just so he can get presents, and it’s distracting because Patrick actually tries being Just Coworkers with him for five minutes before that, which he hates, and it’s distracting because David does a hilarious, silly, sexy, deeply unsexy, emotional Tina Turner lip synch to convince Patrick to forgive him for the presents thing. It’s the kind of thing he never would’ve thought David would do, which is what makes it beautiful, in its own goofy way, what makes it sincere. It’s David’s way of saying that he’s in this as much as Patrick is, and that on its own is distracting.

Patrick is also distracted, through that entire day, by David’s sheer presence, David’s body and smile and way of moving, David’s physical existence in his world again. It’s a shocking pleasure to finish restocking the creams or ringing up a customer and turn around to see David there, back in the store, back where he belongs. The space makes more sense with David in it.

So it would be easy, he thinks, to remain distracted. *Does this mean we . . . are back?* David asked, pawing at him cutely, and in dealing with the hurdles they had to overcome, and the desire to forgive and be forgiven, Patrick thinks he could easily just say yes to that question and have them both go back to what they were doing, to where they were. In the moment when David throws himself on the floor at the lip synch crescendo, letting the whole town see him being ridiculous, Patrick throws his arms in the air and wants to kiss him, to muss up his hair, to have makeup sex with him.

But he wants something else, too.

* They do have makeup sex, and it’s good, it’s amazing. Patrick missed David physically, he realizes, as he gets to touch him again, as his hands skim David’s upper arms, his shoulders, down his chest. His palms feel sensitive, like his skin all by itself missed and recognizes David’s skin, like something magnetic and powerful is drawing them back together. They kiss for a long, long time before they fuck, both of them unwilling to leave each others’ mouths alone, so the orgasm part ends up happening rough and sudden, when they’re too overwhelmed with sensation to do anything more complicated than just rut against each other, naked and hot and slick, body to body.

After, Patrick cleans them up and then gets back in bed, wrapping his arms around David, holding tight. David doesn’t seem to mind, reciprocating with his usual light fingertip-petting over Patrick’s back and shoulders.

It feels familiar. But maybe that’s part of the problem.

“Is Ray coming back tonight?” David asks, after a few minutes.

“Don’t know,” Patrick says. “He said he and Joon-ho were having dinner, but I’m not sure if he meant here or in Elmdale.” David nods, then gets up, takes a sweater and sweatpants out of his overnight bag, and pulls them on.
Patrick decides he doesn’t want to be naked while David’s clothed, so he reaches for a t-shirt and pajama bottoms for himself.

“Can we talk about it?” he asks, as he pulls the pajamas up his hips.

“About what?” David lies back down, all in black, the shape of his body hidden under the baggy cloth. Patrick looks at him from where he’s sitting on the edge of the bed. He misses the intimacy, the immediacy, of his skin.


“Yeah. Okay,” David says, in a way that doesn’t sound like he’s okay at all. “Okay, let’s get something to eat.”

Patrick lays down on his side next to David, frowning. “I’m serious.”

“That much is very clear.” Then David takes his hand, and holds it a little too tight. “I’m gonna need to not do this on an empty stomach. Okay?”

Patrick breathes. “Okay.”

They warm up some leftovers and eat in the kitchen.

“Let me know when you’re full enough to handle emotional conversations,” Patrick jokes.

David makes a face. “Okay, fine,” he says. There’s the hint of a smile playing around his mouth, which makes Patrick feel a lot less nervous. “Tell me about your engagement. Who proposed?”

“I did,” Patrick says.

“Where?”

These aren’t the kinds of questions that Patrick expected. “Um. In a park.”

“Was it romantic?”

Patrick hesitates. “I don’t know. I tried for it to be. I mostly felt nervous. It was really hard just to make the decision to do it.”

“Mm-hmm. And how long between when you got engaged romantically in a park and when you called it off?”

There it is. “Ten months,” Patrick says.

“Got it.”

“They were the longest ten months of my life,” Patrick adds, desperately, remembering. “I was miserable. I think I made her miserable, too. The months I’ve spent with you have felt like . . . so much more. Just being able to be honest.”

He winces at the word as he says it, and David’s eyebrow quirks, but he doesn’t call Patrick out on it. “I get that,” he says, instead, voice a lot softer. “I do. I’m . . . sorry you were so miserable. That you went through that.” The words are sincere, but don’t sound natural in David’s mouth, like he’s trying hard to figure out how to be supportive in the moment.
'Thanks,' Patrick says.

‘I don’t know what else you want me to ask,’” David says, after a few more seconds tick by. “Do you have other exes who will come out of the woodwork? Or who are texting you to get back together?”

‘No,” Patrick says. “I mean, there are—there were other girls. Women. Some of them I dated for a long time. But nobody else like Rachel. No one I’m in close contact with.” He thinks about it. “I think a few of them are Facebook friends.”

‘And . . . can I. Will you tell me? If they reach out? Or if Rachel does, again?” David looks so hesitant, asking that, as if he still thinks he doesn’t have the right to know.

‘Yes,” Patrick says, fervently. “I promise I will.”

There’s a thoughtful silence between them. Patrick wonders if he should tell David more, give him all the names of all the girls he’s ever dated. Tell him how each one ended. Tell him how he’d been searching for something that he couldn’t ever find, until he came here. He hadn’t wanted David to know, hadn’t wanted David to think about how stupid he’d been. Now he doesn’t care, would tell David about every terrible asshole thing he’s ever done, every moment when he should’ve fucking realized he was gay already, if it means he’ll stay.

It’s all too much, though, and Patrick can’t say all of it at once, so he stays quiet.

David steps into the silence instead. “And there weren’t any . . . guys. Ever.”

Confused, Patrick says, “No? I mean. I told you that. The first time you . . . you kissed me.”

‘Mmm.” David gives him a nervous half-smile. “What you said was, you’d never kissed a guy before. And, especially with men, there are a lot of people who . . . prefer to do stuff without kissing. Who don’t want to kiss. So. I wasn’t sure.”

It’s not hard to imagine what he’s talking about: locker room handjobs, or blowjobs in the backs of bars, anonymous sex, maybe men who call you faggot and push you away if you try to kiss them, like in the porn. In high school, he suspected that some of the guys on his baseball team were doing that kind of stuff; he always pretended not to notice, tried not to think about it. Patrick doesn’t know if his life would’ve been easier or harder if he’d had those kinds of experiences before he met David. If he’d at least been able to figure out what his body had wanted so badly. But he hadn’t, and David is all he wants now, so it isn’t worth wondering about.

‘Nobody,” he says. “You’re the only guy.” Then he thinks about it for a minute, and adds, “Well. The only guy I ever—that I’ve done anything with.”

This gets him a raised eyebrow and an intent, listening expression. “Go on,” David says.

‘There were boys I—in retrospect, I guess I had crushes. This one kid in grade eleven, I played lacrosse with him. And in middle school there was this, the first baseman on my baseball team.”

‘Lots of little sports crushes,” David says, in his patronizing that’s-so-cute voice, the voice he uses to tease Alexis or Stevie, sometimes. Patrick bristles.

‘And I think I was . . . sort of in love with a kid in my Econ class in university,” he adds, pointedly.

David just nods thoughtfully. “And do you ever think about getting back in touch with any of them?”
“What? No,” Patrick says. He’s still Facebook friends with Jason from Econ, but they haven’t seen each other in years. “They’re not even gay.”

“They would probably say the same thing about you, if asked,” David points out, sounding way too reasonable. “You could reach out.”

Patrick’s jaw doesn’t drop, but it’s a near thing. “Okay, I thought we were having a discussion here about stuff you need to know to be able to trust me, and now it somehow sounds like a discussion about you setting me up with my middle school crush.”

“I’m just trying to figure out . . . what you want. What you need.” Patrick can’t quite read the expression on David’s face, even though there’s so much of it.

“I don’t need to date Peter from my high school lacrosse team,” Patrick says, trying not to let his tone rise but failing. “I didn’t just spend a week trying to woo back Peter from my high school lacrosse team. I haven’t been dating Peter from my high school lacrosse team for four months—”

“Shhh, shh, okay, I get it,” David says, grinning, and leans over to cuddle Patrick’s shoulders and kiss his temple. Patrick humphs out a breath, disgruntled. “Woo?”

“You heard me.”

“Hm. Peter’s a strong name.”

“Well, he was a strong guy. And tall. And really, really handsome.”

“I bet,” David says. “I’m very jealous.”

“Good.”

David’s still cuddling him, so gently, the way he always does, with loose hands or fingertip-touches, light touches that are easy to pull away from. It makes Patrick’s mind circle back around to something he said earlier.

He takes a breath and asks. “Did you have sex with men who didn’t want to kiss you?”

“Sure,” David says, easily, pulling out of the loose embrace. “I had sex with everyone. You know that.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. This upsets him, though he can’t put his finger on why. It’s not the idea of David having slept with a lot of people, or having had a lot of kinds of sex. It’s something about the way David says it. Something about David saying damaged goods. Something about the way David touches him all the time but rarely holds him tight.

“Okay, then.” David swallows. “So. While we were apart, I thought a lot about why you didn’t tell me. That she was texting you. And—I think I get it. What you said, about starting something new here. It felt like it was about me, but. I think it wasn’t.”


David cocks his head, his face doing something complicated that’s both a smile and a frown. “But they’re both you,” he says. “Why would you need to protect me from more of you? You weren’t a serial killer or an extreme juicer or anything.” He narrows his eyes. “Were you?”
“No. You’re safe.”

“Good.”

“I was just a—stereotypical repressed gay guy, I guess. Not that interesting.”

David leans over and kisses him kind of awkwardly on the shoulder, just where his t-shirt is sliding away from his neck. “The last thing I need after this week is for you to get any more interesting, honey.”

He stands to put their bowls in the sink, and Patrick doesn’t even think he knows what he just did, what he just said.

Patrick’s skin is flushed, suddenly, embarrassment and pleasure rolling through him. David’s never called Patrick a pet name before. He’s called him pretty, or gorgeous, and that had been hard enough to accept. But this. He thinks the last man who called him honey was his first-grade teacher, the time he skinned his knee really badly at recess and cried. Patrick remembers that, remembers Mr Bradley saying oh no, okay honey, let’s get your mom to come get you. It was memorable, because teachers didn’t usually say that kind of thing to kids. But it had been a lot of blood. It’d taken a lot of blood, to draw that reaction out of Mr Bradley. Patrick can’t remember his dad ever calling him that, maybe because he’d never bled that much in front of his dad.

David saying it sets something loose in him that he didn’t know was tied up. He stands, and meets him at the sink, and kisses him, their bodies pressed together from chest to knees; kisses him deeply, with his hands on David’s face; kisses him for a long time.

“What’s that for?” David asks, breathless, when they pull apart for air.

Patrick shakes his head, because he wouldn’t know how to say it.

David swallows. “Please.”

Patrick tries.

“You called me—I’ve never—” he frowns, embarrassed. David’s face lights up like a firework.

“Oh,” he says. “Okay.” He kisses Patrick, returns the same kiss back a little softer and slower. “Honey,” he says, low and breathless. Patrick growls a little and takes his mouth again. They’re still kissing when Ray walks in.

“Hello Patrick. Hello David,” he says, pointedly, as they break apart. David’s arms stay wrapped around Patrick’s neck, and Patrick’s hands stay resting on David’s lower back.


“All those gifts worked, I see.”

David kind of full-body winces, but Patrick smiles, not really able to be annoyed about that anymore, not with David in his arms and calling him—calling him that.

“Oh, like a charm,” Patrick agrees, sunnily, enjoying David’s continued embarrassment. He deserves it, after all.

“Also I heard something about a private dance performance? David, you might want to know that quite a few people walk by the store windows in the evenings.”
“Mmm, I do know that, thank you Ray,” David replies huskily. Patrick grins, lets his head fall against David’s shoulder.

“Very well.” Ray takes a moment then, gazing at them and smiling, like he’s basking in some light they’re putting off, before he speaks again. “Okay. I’ll let you two enjoy your evening.”

He probably won’t, if past experience is any judge, but Patrick says “Thank you, Ray,” anyway. He looks at David and jerks his head towards the stairs as a way to ask the question. David nods and follows him up.

“C’mere,” Patrick says, taking his hand, bringing him to lay down on the bed. They end up on their backs, Patrick’s leg thrown over David’s, their heads together, looking up at the ceiling.

“We should put a little star map up there,” David says. “Like the outdoors but without the nature.”

Patrick huffs a laugh.

“You wanna . . . watch a movie or something?” David asks, after a little silence. “Or we could try the Very Quiet Handjobs.” His hand is moving on Patrick’s thigh, stroking up and down over the pajama pants. It feels nice.

They’ve done Very Quiet Handjobs a few times, when Ray was home and they just wanted to get each other off quickly and discreetly. They’re something of a misnomer; Patrick has a suspicion that they’re not quiet at all, much less Very Quiet.

He frowns, thinking about David saying, breezily, *I had sex with everyone.* “What about your past?”

David’s hand stills on his leg. “Pardon me?” he asks, his voice going high.

“I told you mine.”

“You were the one who had a secret,” David argues, and Patrick figures that’s fair.

“Will you tell me anyway?” Patrick asks. David blows out a breath. Patrick feels it underneath him, David’s chest moving.

“But I’m . . . googleable. At least some of my past relationships are. And my whole family lives here in town, and you’ve met two of my exes. And I do sometimes talk about my past.”

“You do sometimes make jokes about your past,” Patrick corrects, thinking about the birthday clown.

“Fine, but, still. I’m not some mysterious accountant from out of town.”

“You think I’m an accountant?” Patrick asks, surprised.

“No,” David denies quickly. “That’s not the point.”

“Well, what’s the point?”

“The *point* is, what . . . what do you want to know?” His voice is rising quickly, and he’s talking fast; Patrick frowns at the ceiling. “Which celebrities I’ve fucked? What kinds of sex I’ve had? What kinky shit I’ve done? Because if you can imagine it, I’ve probably done it, and trust me, you don’t want to know about it all. You wanna know everyone’s name and HIV status? Because I didn’t. You wanna know who I fucked and left? Or whose marriages I broke up? You wanna know about, about—”
“Okay, let’s slow down,” Patrick interrupts, sitting up so he can look down at David’s face. David clenches his jaw, anxious. “I don’t need to know all of that. Though it is a good reminder that we should go get tested together. And if there are kinds of sex you enjoy that we haven’t done, hey, you should tell me so we can give ‘em a spin.” He says this last with an affectionate squeeze of David’s knee.

Neither the words nor the squeeze have their intended effect of calming David down. He just lets out a frustrated breath and clenches his jaw a little more before he speaks, pushing himself up against the headboard so he’s sitting up too.

“We can get tested. Let’s get tested.”

Patrick swallows and tries to figure out how to say it. There’s a curious part of him that does want to know about the . . . the famous people sex parties and expensive whips, or, or whatever. He pushes that down, because that’s not what’s important, and because David deserves better than being treated like a zoo exhibit for him to gawk at.

“David, I want to hear about . . . the things that mattered to you,” Patrick says, slowly, feeling it out. “The things that made you who you are. The relationships you still think about. Those are the stories I want to hear. What’s going to be important for you, and for us, going forward. So this doesn’t happen again.”

“Mkay. You realize that’s even more terrifying, right?” David says, rolling his eyes back in his head. “Are you sure we can’t go back to the celebrity kinky sex acts talk?”

“David,” Patrick says, warningly.

David meets his eyes, finally, and nods.

“Stevie said . . . when we were at that spa, Stevie said that if she could know my history and not run screaming, you could probably handle it too,” David says, grimacing hopefully.

“Well, I don’t know about that. Stevie’s a lot tougher than I am.”

“Stevie’s a lot tougher than everyone. Like . . . old shoe leather. Except, you know, gorgeous and funny.” He says it offhandedly, then darts a glance at Patrick, maybe self-conscious about talking about her that way in front of him.

“Okay,” Patrick says. “Why don’t we start there. Tell me about you and Stevie.” Patrick’s curious to hear about that one anyway, mostly because it seems like Stevie has been a strong influence on David over the last few years, and partly because Patrick’s also friends with Stevie and wants to learn more about her, and at least a little bit because Patrick wants to hear more about David’s pansexuality. While he has plenty of personal experience with David’s attraction to men—or, one man, anyway—he wants to hear about the rest of it, about David’s experience with other genders. Patrick can admit that, on some level, he’s deeply curious about what it’s like, what it meant for David growing up, what the world looks like through his eyes. He doesn’t ever want to grill David on it, or make David feel like a freak, but he wants to listen, to learn as much as he can from what David wants to share.

David rubs a hand over his face. “See, this is the thing. So, telling you about terrible shit I’ve done in relationships makes me think you’ll . . . whatever . . .”


“Fine, yes. But on the other hand, telling you about the one other relationship that I didn’t completely
nuke to hell makes me worry you’ll think I’m—that I’m not in this.”

“You’re worried I’ll be jealous of Stevie,” Patrick translates.

“Sort of? You sort of were, when she and Jake—”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine.” Patrick takes a breath, not liking the hot, annoyed feeling creeping up his throat. “I mean, I was feeling kind of . . . vulnerable, that night, and also I got over it, so—”

“Okay,” David says, softly. “Sorry.”

“Sorry,” Patrick echoes, putting his hand on David’s knee and squeezing again. “I’m not jealous of Stevie. Tell me the story.”

David does, haltingly at first, then with more humour, a story about being suddenly poor and thrown into a weird small town and finding just one person who understood him.

“Who didn’t take your crap,” Patrick says.

“Who was smart and funny and worth my time,” David replies.

“And gorgeous.”

“I—yes.”

“Uh-huh.”

David tells the rest. It’s a good story, a very David and Stevie story, friendship and charades and stoned sex with a ceiling mirror and an undercover op at a dinner party, and Patrick actually is a little jealous, as it turns out, because the two of them have a kind of kinship he knows he’ll never have with David. They’re so alike, in a lot of ways. They’re introverted in the same ways, and they self-sabotage in the same ways, and they get anxious in the same ways. Whereas he and David are much more . . . night and day. He hopes that’s enough to keep them together.


David looks at him curiously, something dangerous behind his eyes. “I fucked Sebastien when he was here in town. To get the memory card from his camera.”

“Oh,” Patrick says, feeling like the wind’s been knocked out of him.

“Or, more accurately, I should say that I let him fuck me. He was always into controlling me, holding me down, being on top. Same old same old. He’s boring, really. But I let him do it. I liked it. I came really hard.”

“You’re trying to shock me now.” Patrick doesn’t like it, doesn’t like the gleam in David’s eye and the hard set to his mouth. He doesn’t like the image, either, of another man fucking David’s ass, the two of them sweaty and naked on one of the motel’s scratchy beige blankets.

Patrick was here in town, then. Patrick remembers texting David about it, talking to David about it. And some shithead photographer was holding David down and fucking him and making him come, while Patrick was trying to work up the courage to just—to fucking kiss him. And he hadn’t even managed that, in the end. It makes him furious.

“Only if you’re shocked by me manipulating people with sex. I used to do it all the time.” David’s voice has gone cold and light, as if he couldn’t care less about what he’s saying. The kicker is,
Patrick knows that’s not actually the story, because he was there: he remembers David worried about his mom, wanting to protect her.

“You’re being an asshole right now,” Patrick says, hearing his own voice rising. “Why are you being an asshole?”

He sees, physically observes, more smart, cutting, asshole remarks flit across David’s consciousness. Patrick’s breathing hard; he can hear himself breathing. David closes his eyes, and grits his teeth, and then opens his eyes again to look at Patrick.

“I’m breaking up with myself so you don’t have to do it,” David says. His voice sounds strangled. Patrick wants to kiss him, or maybe get up and leave and slam the door on his way out. Both of those.

“Well. Stop,” he says. Maybe David can see the conflict he’s feeling, because he nods, pursing his lips.

“I thought about you,” he says, softly, after a long pause. “When I was with Sebastien. I was— you hadn’t really given me any signs, but I was fantasizing about you pretty often. Back then.”

Patrick likes that idea, a lot, probably way more than he should. “I gave you signs,” he says, defensively.

David ignores him. “It wasn’t like. I mean, I also thought about him. It’s hard to be in a room with Sebastien and not think about him, he takes up space. But I did think about you, a little.”

This is so honest that it makes something in Patrick’s chest relax. “I was thinking about you a lot back then, too,” he says. His mind flashes from thought to thought, trying to process what David’s just told him. He settles on something he wants to say, something he wants David to know. “I did look you up, you know. Back when we first met.”

“You did.” David’s voice is flat.

“I did.”

“And what did you think?”

Patrick looks up at him. He looks nervous, and vulnerable. Not at all like his pictures. “I thought the guy in People magazine didn’t seem very much like the guy I’d met with the good business plan and the soft sweaters.”

“Hmm,” David says, but his open, expressive face moves on to looking pleased.

Patrick thinks of something else David said that stood out to him. “So. Do you like being held down while you’re getting fucked, then? Do you want me to do that to you?”


“See? We’re learning a lot already.”

David laughs, a little hollowly, and takes his hand. Patrick squeezes it.

“Tell me another,” Patrick says.

*
Over the next few days, David keeps telling him stories, in quiet moments that they have together, after the store closes, walking home after dinner at the café, in the backseat of the Lincoln after the kind of awkward, hilarious sex that—Patrick’s learning—is only fun because it’s undignified. David doesn’t come at the stories directly, instead edging his way up to them in conversation, circling around them once or twice, waiting for Patrick to nod, to kiss his temple, to tell him go on before finally settling on what to say. They’re all, every single one of them, about heartbreak, and sometimes the other person was the one to leave, say hurtful things, sabotage a gallery opening, smash a priceless vase on their way out the door, and sometimes it was David who did it first, but it was always heartbreak. And it was a lot of assholes; Patrick finds himself getting mad, retroactively, at how many people were complete assholes to David.

“I wasn’t so great either, back then,” David says, sitting on Ray’s couch with him, when Patrick tries to, very gently and hesitantly, bring this up. Patrick shakes his head, because he can’t let it go at that.

“You deserved better. I think no one deserves that, but also, I think you deserved so much better. I think you always did. No matter what.”

David watches his face for a long time, when he says that, and swallows, and then after a lot of seconds have ticked by, he finally says, “Okay.”

Patrick resolves to tell him that again, to keep telling him that.

As time goes on some of the stories get darker, with more drugs, and more of what David calls artistic tempers and Patrick’s pretty sure are actually predictors of abusive behaviour, but at no point does Patrick want to run screaming. It’s the opposite: he wants to gather David in his arms and hold him tight, remind himself that he gets to look after him, now.

It’s not all of his stories, of course. Patrick gathers that these are the important ones, the torn and charred remnants that David hasn’t been able to shake. None of the stories he sees as formative are happy. Even Patrick was happy with Rachel, sometimes.

“Sorry,” David says, in the Lincoln, bits of his hair stuck with sweat to his forehead, after he finishes talking about Anderson Cooper and parasailing and his resultant fear of heights. “I’m not very interesting either. They all end the same way. Unhappy.”

“I guess they all end that way for everyone. Till the last one,” Patrick says.

David doesn’t reply to that, and Patrick doesn’t have any more words to follow it up with. The cold is starting to creep into the car, even despite the running heater, so Patrick buttons David’s pants up for him and kisses his mouth before they get back into the front so David can drive him home.

Alone in his bed that night, he finds himself unable to sleep. After a while, he gets up and grabs his phone off of the dresser. He opens the Facebook app and stares at his page for a long time, then makes a custom group of people who are part of his new life: Ray, Joon-ho, Ronnie, Karen, Jeff and Emily, a few others. Then he changes his relationship status to In a Relationship, declines to enter a name for the person he’s In a Relationship with, and just makes it visible to the custom group.

The name for the custom group is New Patrick.

* 

The bell over the door rings, so Patrick leaves the inventory he’s been counting in the back and walks out to see who it is.

“Oh, hi, Alexis,” he says. She hasn’t been in the store in a while; she’s pretty sure she mostly swipes
David’s products at the motel when he’s not looking, since that’s been the cause of several annoyed rants from David recently. “Can I help you with something?”

Alexis purses her lips, wide-eyed, and nods, craning her head around to look over Patrick’s shoulder. “Um, is David here?”

“No, he’s out getting us lunch.”

Alexis nods again. “Okay.”

She doesn’t say anything else, but stays up at the counter, resting her fingertips just on the edge, in the same hesitant way that David does. “Did you . . . need to talk to David?” he asks, eventually.

Shaking her head, Alexis says, “No, no no no. I do not. I need to talk to you.” With this, she reaches out and boops Patrick’s nose.

Patrick blinks. “Okay.”

Alexis immediately turns away from him and picks up one of the lip balms. He waits for her to talk. When she finally does, she says, “Oh, these come in cinnamon now?”

“I mean, David will be back soon,” Patrick puts in, which makes Alexis put down the lip balm, narrow her eyes, and brush her hair away from her face in a businesslike way.

“Okay, fine,” she says, and Patrick’s starting to get that she and her brother aren’t as alike as they seem sometimes when they’re arguing. What did David say about her, back when they first met? Chiffon over steel, something like that. She locks eyes with Patrick and says, “This has never happened before. To David.”

Feeling a twist in his stomach, Patrick asks, “What’s never happened before?” He has a feeling he knows, but he wants to be clear. He knows with a cold certainty that he doesn’t want to make an enemy out of Alexis.

“The . . . long-term monogamy thing. I mean, I don’t know all the details, because I wasn’t always there, but I kept in touch. I came home when Sebastien dumped him. He doesn’t remember it that way, but I did.”

“And you . . . looked after him this time? When we were . . . apart?” It hurts in a new way to think that the secret he kept from David had required so much care, so much attention from those around him.

“Ugh, no. Stevie did, mostly. Plus I did let him have extra morning bathroom time since his skincare game has been sorely lacking the last couple weeks.”

“So generous,” Patrick says. She rolls her eyes at him.

“And I like. Lent him that cold cream that he likes. And watched stupid Downton Abbey with him. And, whatever, the point is, it’s a lot of work to be around David when he’s wallowing and I would prefer if I didn’t have to do it, like, ever. Again.”

“Are you—Alexis, are you here to tell me not to hurt your brother?” It’s simultaneously sweet and terrifying.

“Anymore,” Alexis corrects, voice hard like the gleaming, enameled tip of her fingernail, which is currently tapping on the counter for emphasis. “He thinks he always has to look after me but he
needs looking after too. There is, like, ample evidence for that.” She pets her hand through her hair distractedly. “So don’t hurt him anymore.”

“I’m not—I wasn’t planning on it. I didn’t mean to do it the first time,” Patrick says, as honest as he can be. Alexis squints at him.

“Okay, but, you ran off on that sweet lil Rachel and didn’t answer her texts. And she was so . . . like, pretty, and nice, and, you know, like, her aesthetic even kind of matched yours.” She gestures emphatically throughout this description of Rachel, wrists twirling freely.

“That’s . . . not untrue,” Patrick admits. “I did break up with her, though, before I left.” It’s unexpectedly painful to have to bare this to Alexis; it was bad enough to have to go through it with David. But she’s David’s sister, and she cares about him, and she’s right that she’s . . . entitled to this, in some way. Entitled to a part of him. He doesn’t like it, but that doesn’t make it not true. “I don’t know what else to say,” he finishes.

“Unghf,” she groans. “This is so stupid! Look, I like you, okay? My dad likes you. I mean. My mom likes you? Which, believe me, is not an easy thing to make happen. And David really, really likes you, I mean, newsflash—and we all, we’re not—used to it.”

“Liking people?” Patrick asks.

“Liking people enough to make them family,” Alexis shoots back, annoyed. Patrick raises his eyebrows, surprised. “It’s basically never happened before.” She sighs. “Just. It’s important. If you’re going to date my brother, and keep dating him, you’re important.”

“Oh.” Patrick says. He’d known that he mattered to David, but. He hadn’t known this. He’d met the families of lots of girls he was dating, before; it was something he was accustomed to, something he was usually good at. He’d gotten along better with Rachel’s mom than Rachel did, even despite the constant breakups over the years. He hadn’t thought that the Roses weren’t used to it like he was, that they might . . . take it more seriously than he did.

“So like. I know he’s annoying or whatever, but don’t—Rachel said you’d broken up and gotten back together a lot, and that’s not what David—”

“I’m not gonna do that to him,” Patrick says, interrupting her. “I—it’s different with him than with Rachel.”

“Because you’re like, gay now,” Alexis says, waving her hand breezily at Patrick’s months and years of painful closeting and difficult coming out. “Yeah, I get it, but—”

“Because I love him,” Patrick says, interrupting again with the only words he has inside him. He feels his own eyes widen in shock as soon as he says it, and Alexis’s eyes widen to match him. His breath catches in his chest; he’s never said it out loud before.


“Yes,” Patrick hisses, embarrassed now. “I just don’t—I’m waiting for the right time to tell him, but. I’m not. I don’t want to hurt him.” He feels himself blushing, to the tips of his ears.

“Yeah. Well. You can love someone and still hurt them,” Alexis says, eyes flinty, brushing her hair back over her shoulder.

She looks at him appraisingly. It’s disconcerting.

“Okay, but do you know that David never says those words to other humans? It’s like pulling teeth getting him to say it back, if you say it to him. Like literally, I have only seen it happen once.”

“I don’t need him to say it back,” Patrick says, sounding braver and more mature than he feels. He totally wants David to say it back. But it’s not as important as the other thing, the saying it thing. Patrick’s been thinking that he’s going to end up saying it sometime soon. He didn’t know he’d tell Alexis first, though.

Alexis looks taken aback by this information, and she stares at him for a long time. Patrick shuffles from one foot to the other. Then she leans forward, like she did before, and boops his nose again. “Boop,” she says, ostensibly for emphasis. This boop feels more real, more sincere, than the last boop, but then, Patrick’s new at translating Alexis-speak. He looks up and past her, out the window, trying to figure out what to do or say in response, and is instantly glad that he did.

“Um,” Patrick says, nodding his head towards the door behind her. She looks over her shoulder, and sees what he saw, David coming out of the café with lunch in his hands.

“Okay, my advice?” Alexis says, in a low, rushed voice. “Don’t wait too long. It’s—take it from me, okay? It’s easy to miss out on what you wanted if you’re too scared to, uh. Too scared to make the most of it when it’s right in front of you. And I’m telling you,” she clears her throat, “that David is right in front of you. If you want . . . that. With him.”

“Okay,” he says, trying to process all of that. He smiles at her, shaken and grateful, and she smiles back. “Speaking, um, from personal experience?”

“I’m hosting an entire Singles Week here, aren’t I?” she shoots back, half annoyed, half preening, running her hand through her hair again. “Stands to reason I haven’t found true love yet.”

“I . . . hope that works out for you,” Patrick says, and he means it; he wants good things for Alexis. He understands better, now, why David cares about her so deeply, and worries about her. Patrick doesn’t know how it was in the past, but it’s clear that, here and now, she cares about him just as much.

“Thanks,” she says, dipping her knees in a sort of flirty posing curtsy, back to her usual light tone of voice. “Here’s hoping.” She tries out a wink just as David comes in to the store.

“Ew,” he says, watching her weird eye-closing process. “Why are you in here winking at my boyfriend?”

“Because Patrick and I are like, buds now,” Alexis replies, proudly. “Isn’t that right, Patrick?”

“That is precisely correct, yes. Your sister and I are best buds.”

“Ew,” David says, again, and Alexis smiles like sunshine, and Patrick chuckles.

Alexis sticks around while they eat, stealing a lot of Patrick’s fries and a few of David’s, even giving advice to the occasional customer. Patrick can’t deny that Alexis can upsell customers just as well as her brother can, if not more so. It’s nice, hanging out with both of them; they have an energy together, a sharp and biting back and forth that’s sometimes juvenile and sometimes sweet and always a lot of fun to watch. It makes him miss his cousin Neil, a little bit.

He should text Neil, maybe.
“So, what were you and Alexis talking about? Before I came in?” David asks, while Alexis is explaining exfoliation to an elderly lady.

Patrick looks up at him; it’s clear that it’ll bother him if Patrick doesn’t say, and Patrick doesn’t want to keep any secrets from him, if he can help it. “You know, one day you’re gonna have to get comfortable with me talking to the people you love even when you’re not in the room,” he says, to buy time.

“Ugh, who told you I love Alexis? I’ve only said that to my parents, like, twice. And, okay, once at a Mariah Carey concert.”

“Noted,” Patrick says, smiling. “She seemed to think you did.”

David rolls his eyes back. “Well, fine, I guess one of those times I told my parents, she was included too,” he admits. “So what were you—”

“She came to tell me not to hurt you again,” Patrick says, deciding that’s the most important part of the conversation. “She was worried about you.”

A lot of emotions cross David’s face at this information, all of them very visible but few of them interpretable, to Patrick, anyway. “I am going to have to—it’s not acceptable for her to be, to be interfering in my personal life—”

Patrick grabs his suddenly very fast-moving hands to still them. “Shhh,” he says, so that Alexis doesn’t overhear. She’s laughing with the elderly lady and showing her to the hair products, now. “She means well. She wants good things for you.”

“Yes. Well. But I—it’s not like—she shouldn’t do that to you. She doesn’t understand what the situation was.”

“I don’t mind,” Patrick says, still in a soothing tone of voice. “I kind of—I liked it.”

This gets David’s attention off of his sister immediately. “You liked my sister yelling at you?”

“She didn’t really yell. She booped my nose. And it made me feel . . . I don’t know. Like part of the. Part of the family.”

David’s face comes over with a little smile. “Okay,” he says, huskily. “Well, I mean, if that’s what you want. I wouldn’t personally recommend it, but—”

Patrick kisses him, softly. David melts against him, the tension leaving his face and neck and shoulders as Patrick touches him. When he pulls back, he sees Alexis over David’s shoulder, giving him another terrible wink.

He winks back.

*

Patrick organizes a schedule for different players on the team to go in to complain to the Recreation committee, who occupy a dingy, poorly-lit side office in Town Hall. They take in the letters they wrote, and they demand to speak to the person in charge, and they lodge official complaint after official complaint. It’s not a big surprise when it gets back to Jack; it’s a small town, and people know each other, and it’s obviously a coordinated effort to get him banned.

What is a surprise is that Jack comes after Patrick for it.
“It makes sense,” Jeff says, afterwards, wincing and applying the ice pack to Patrick’s cheek. “You’re the only other white cis guy on the team.”

“That’s such bullshit,” Patrick says, hissing through his teeth at the tenderness and pain when the ice pack makes contact again. “I support your right to get hit in the face by an asshole too.”

“That’s great ally work,” Jeff says, sarcastically, clearly trying to suppress a grin. “Really thoughtful about your cis privilege.” He draws the ice pack away, looking underneath again, then plants it back on Patrick’s face.

“Jesus, that hurts,” Patrick complains. “Getting hit really really hurts!”

“You’ve never been hit before?” Jeff asks, astonished.

“No! I mean, in hockey sometimes? Or by a wild pitch? But not like this, someone’s fist in my face. I never—there was never any reason for anyone to hit me, before.” Fun, easy-going Patrick, gets good grades, dates pretty girls, doesn’t make trouble. “I got along with everybody.”

“Wow,” Jeff says. “I feel like I spent all of high school fighting people. This one kid and I used to beat the shit out of each other in the boot room every day at lunch for a year. And this girl Charlotte used to say so much shit to me, I remember I bit her, like, broke the skin. She had to get a shot. And then I had to fight all her cronies.”


Jeff laughs, like it’s not awful, like it’s funny. “I once picked a fight with my grade ten physics teacher in the hallway.”

“. . . okay, impressive,” Patrick says, grudgingly.

“I was an angry kid,” Jeff says, and shrugs. Jeff’s one of the kindest, most measured people Patrick knows, and he wonders where that anger went, whether he stopped feeling so angry after he transitioned, or when he got older, or when he became a dad, or what. Patrick still feels angry a lot.

“Okay, okay, you’re pressing too hard, hand it to me.”

Jeff relinquishes his hold on the ice pack, and Patrick takes over.

“Do you think this is it? It’s over now? Or is Jack going to keep coming by to beat us all up?” Jeff asks.

“I think it’s worth letting everyone know that he’s mad and willing to get violent about it,” Patrick says. “Plus I’m going to take this to the Recreation people. No way he gets on a curling team this winter now. He made our case for us.”

“Good point.”

Patrick thinks back on the fight, wondering if they effectively dissuaded Jack from trying it again. “Did I at least give him something to think about?”

“Well,” Jeff says, diplomatically, and then stops talking. “Well, look, it was your first ever fight, and by that metric I think you did great.”

“Thanks,” Patrick says, dryly. He tries not to smile; it hurts when he smiles. “You know, David thinks I’m butch.”
“That’s sweet,” Jeff says, his face doing a strange twisting thing as he forces himself not to laugh.

“Isn’t it?” Patrick agrees.

“Anyway. No, I think Wondo pinning him to the ground while Melissa explained that she knows his boss and could get him fired if he comes back here again? Was more effective than any punch you could’ve thrown. Plus I’m pretty sure he broke some bones in his hand. I know that sound.”

“So long as something worked.” Patrick thinks about that, about Melissa’s automatic targeting of things that actually matter to Jack. “I think if we spread the word around town—Ronnie can help with that. That’ll be the best. Get people on our side.”

“Good call.”

Patrick looks up at Jeff with the eye not covered by the ice pack. “So why’d you hit your grade ten physics teacher?”

Jeff shrugs. “He bumped into me in the hallway.”

“Damn,” Patrick says.

Jeff quirks a smile. “The difference between me and Jack is: I dealt with my shit, and I grew up.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. It’s not the easy answer he was hoping for, but. At least it’s possible.

*  

David is startled and aghast and, Patrick suspects, a little bit turned on by Patrick’s bruised cheekbone. He makes Patrick immediately sit down on his bed, saying “oh my god,” about ten times before sitting next to him. Then he touches it tenderly, one fingertip just skirting along the skin, as his other hand grips Patrick’s thigh possessively.

“It’s not a big deal,” Patrick says, but when he’s told David the whole story, about how Jack reacted to the coup d’equipe and the attempt to get him banned from local sports, about the sad scrambling little fight on the baseball field, David’s still frowning.

“Should we . . . go to the police? Or something? This guy seems dangerous.”

Patrick smiles, even though it hurts, at David’s use of the word we. “I guess we could,” Patrick says. “I don’t know what good it’d do.”

“Um, get it on the record that he’s violent? In case it happens again?”

“The official complaints with the recreation committee will do that,” Patrick sighs.

“I just can’t believe you got in a fight! Over the baseball. I knew team sports were divisive.”

“It really wasn’t the baseball,” Patrick says, for what feels like the tenth time. “It was that Jack is a controlling asshole and we needed him gone.”

“And you made him go away,” David says, kissing Patrick on his uninjured right cheek. There’s a shining, proud look in his eyes that makes Patrick feel weaker than any punch ever could. “You’re such a . . . defender of justice.”

This makes Patrick laugh, and lean in against David’s embrace. Which is when David’s parents walk in. Patrick’s instinct, even after all this time, is still to leap apart, to stop showing affection, but
David’s arms are steady around him and Patrick keeps the instinct to no more than a twitch.

“Hi Mr Rose. Mrs Rose.”

“Patrick! That is one hell of a bruise you’ve got there.” Mr Rose’s eyebrows are up as high as Patrick’s ever seen them.

“Patrick was attacked by some reprobate they kicked off their baseball team,” David explains, succinctly, rubbing Patrick’s shoulder with his hand.

Mrs Rose looks him over sharply. “And who exactly was this undesirable who reacted so pugnaciously to a simple casting decision?” she asks.

“Jack Dwyer? He works at the True Value.” David kisses his temple, and Patrick looks up at Mr and Mrs Rose sheepishly. “It’s fine, honestly, I don’t think it’ll happen again.”

“Well, I should hope not!” Mr Rose says. “Is this person being dealt with?”

“I think word’s gonna get around town about it. Jeff, from my baseball team, he’s talking to Ronnie. And we’re working with Valerie in Recreation to get him banned from municipal sports.”

Pursing her lips briefly, Mrs Rose nods. “Hmm. A whisper campaign. Very well. Then I shall speak to Veronica to see if there isn’t some avenue that Town Council can pursue in this matter, once public opinion has been drummed up.”

“I don’t really want to press charges,” Patrick cautions.

“You could, though, honey,” David says, in an undertone. Patrick feels a little flash of heat roll through him and turns to look in David’s eyes, because David knows how Patrick feels about being called that. David doesn’t look sly or manipulative, though, just concerned, a frown still creasing his face.

Mr Rose frowns. “It would be a lot of hassle to go through the whole trial process. Nearest OPP station is in Elmdale, might be hard to get them to care. He’d probably end up with community service,” he puts in, which makes David’s frown deepen. “Tell you what, though, while your mother talks to Ronnie, I’ll talk to Bob and Roland. We’ll get something in the works so Patrick doesn’t have to go through all that.”

David looks up at them and blinks. “Um. Okay,” he says.

Mr Rose turns to go back into the other room, muttering to himself. Mrs Rose graces them both with a smile. “Let David put some salve on that for you, Patrick. There’s no need to go about town looking like some two-bit pugilist.”

When the door has closed behind her, David does in fact pull a little tin of salve out of the drawer on the nightstand. Patrick recognizes it from the store: witch hazel and arnica. He sits still while David smoothes it over his cheekbone.

“Your parents are really nice to . . . to defend me,” Patrick mentions, hesitantly.

“Mmm. It’d be nice if they’d ever stood up for me like that? But yes, I’m glad they’re helping, for once.”

“They never stood up for you?” Patrick’s image of wealthy families is of rich parents throwing their money and weight around, making life easy for their kids.
“They mostly weren’t there to do any standing up.” David’s fingertip is feather-light on Patrick’s skin. “I had classmates who had helicopter parents. I was always wildly jealous.”

“Huh,” Patrick says. It fits, really, given the things that David’s said before, about wanting to escape. For him, Patrick wonders if part of it was also wanting to be chased. “Well, for what it’s worth, I think them standing up for me is really them standing up for you. By association.”

“That is certainly a sweet way to think about it,” David says. Patrick kisses him.

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Patrick’s cheek heals, but not before Twyla loudly and solicitously gives him free tea and suggests various home remedies so everyone in the café can hear. Word about Jack’s behaviour gets around town, and Patrick hears from Denise, who’s one of the True Value’s seed suppliers, that Jack is now being grimly and unfailingly polite with everyone, since it’s clear that no one’s going to give him another chance after this one.

“I think he’s finally learned a little shame,” she says, conferring with Patrick at the next LGBTQ2AI-plus night. “And the broken fingers help, too. But everyone at True Value is still keeping an eye on him, just in case.”

“Good,” Patrick says, holding up his beer. Denise clinks it with her own. “And thank you, for pointing me in the right direction. We’re bringing this up with Town Council next week, and I think our proposal will go through.”

“I’m glad things can still get done in municipal politics,” Denise replies. “In fact, I’m shocked. Maybe I should take another stab at pushing some of the changes I’ve been wanting to see for rural services.”

“I’ll help, if you like,” Patrick says.

After they’ve laid all the groundwork, the actual Council meeting is a little anticlimactic; when Melissa, Candice, and Jeff all stand up at the meeting to propose an official code of conduct for municipal sports, including protections against discrimination, hate speech, and bullying, Ronnie and Mrs Rose champion it, and Roland and Bob go along cheerfully enough, thanks to Mr Rose’s greasing of the wheels.

David goes with him to the meeting, and claps alongside him when the measure is passed unanimously. “My hero,” he murmurs, in an undertone, lips against Patrick’s ear. It’s a little bit a joke, but also it’s not one, and Patrick flushes, pleased.

In the grand scheme of things, it’s not that much. But they’ve made a part of their town a little better, a little safer. And it’s a part that Patrick cares about. Guys like that don’t belong in sports.

“Under these rules, and given the numerous letters of complaint received by the Recreation committee, Jack Dwyer is hereby officially banned from municipal sports for a period of five years. At that time he may reapply to the Recreation committee if he can show he will no longer be a disruptive influence,” Ronnie concludes.

“It’s too bad the season is basically over,” Wondo says, from Patrick’s other side. “We won’t have much chance to see what we can do without him.”

“Next year,” Patrick says, firmly. He can’t wait, he finds, for next year. He wants to start planning for it. “And I think I have a good idea of what we can do together. We did this.”
Wondo smiles at him. “Yeah. It’s our team now,” he says.

* 

Naked, sweating, working himself slowly into David’s ass, taking his time and feeling every single touch like fire, Patrick wants to say it: he wants to look down into David’s open, beautiful face and say it. It’s on the tip of his tongue, but in a way, it’s in his whole body: it’s I love you on the pads of his fingers where he’s holding David’s thighs, and on his knees where he’s brushing against David’s ass, and in the motion of his cock pushing into David’s tight, slick, heat, and it’s collected in the sweat on his forehead when he dips his head to rest it against David’s firm, broad, hairy chest.

He kisses David so it doesn’t come out, and puts his tongue on David’s nipple to give it something else to do, and if his body keeps saying it, if his fingers and his knees and his cock and his sweat keep saying it, at least it’s not out loud.

“You’re so good,” David says, after, kissing him languidly. They’re in his little twin bed in the motel room and the Roses will probably be back soon, but David’s covering him with kisses anyway, soft and sweet and grateful. “You’re so good to me, Patrick, God, you’re so good at that.”


* 

“I’ve been wanting to say it for months,” he confides to Joon-ho, when they’re getting a Monday lunch together at a restaurant in Elmdale. Joon-ho whistles softly.

“Months?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, sighing. “It’s been—it didn’t take me long.”


“I know what it is,” Patrick replies, though he hadn’t.

He’s never been the type of make hasty, spur-of-the-moment decisions, to let his emotions overrule his sense of practicality. To fall into things without taking his time. Around David, that sometimes . . . goes out the window. He’s still not sure when it’s right to go with his instincts, and when it’s not.

“Well, I think you’re very sweet.”

“Fine, mock me,” Patrick says, grudgingly. “For having emotions.”

Joon-ho grins. “You ever said it to anyone before?”


“And if you tell David, he’s going to think you’re just doing it as an expected thing?”

“No, David’s going to panic and probably leave the room,” Patrick replies, ruefully. “I’m kind of—prepared for that?” He takes a sip of water. “But I don’t want it to be—I want it to be real. To feel real. To both of us.”

Joon-ho shrugs. “Ray and I said it to each other a while ago,” he says. Patrick’s eyebrows go up.
“Really?”

“Couple months after we got back together.”

“That—yeah, I guess that makes sense.” Patrick chews his lip. He wants to grill Joon-ho on how he did it, what made it special, what made it feel like the same thing out loud, in words, as the thing inside, the feeling. He doesn’t know how to match the words to the feeling.

Joon-ho raises an eyebrow at him. “I mean. If you feel it, he probably knows it already. Right?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, thinking of the song they gave to each other, of all the ways he’s told David already. You make me feel right, he’d said. Did David just think that was because he’s gay, and David’s a man? Did David know that it was him, him in particular, who made Patrick feel that way?

“So. Whatever you say, if he feels it, he’ll know what you mean. Stop angsting about it.” Joon-ho takes another bite of his burger.

“You act like this is all so simple.”

Joon-ho smiles, swallowing. “It is, actually? I’ve never met anyone who gets in their own way as much as you do.”

“I don’t know, have you met my boyfriend, David Rose?”

“Like. Briefly? You should really make him hang out with your friends more.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, noncommittally. He takes a bite of his sandwich. “So. How’s the new supervisor?”

“Pretty good, actually. Not so conservative, more interested in my project. Actually emails me back. I no longer feel quite so much like grad school is a sucking void of misery that eats my labour and burps out disregard.”

“Evocative,” Patrick laughs. “But that sounds like an overall positive comment.”

As Patrick listens to Joon-ho talk about his grad work, somewhere in the back of his mind, he makes a decision: he’s going to let himself say it to David, the next time he feels it. He’s going to say it, and for the first time, he’s going to mean it.

I’ve only said it to my parents twice, and once at a Mariah Carey concert, David told him. Patrick can work with that. He’ll think of something to say, something tailored to David, something to make it special. He’ll practice it, and then when he finds the moment to say it, he’ll say it right.

*  

It takes him a little time, but David says it back, eyes bright with tears.

Patrick watches him go to get him a tea, and he thinks, I’ve never been happier.

*  

At their last practice of the year, when it’s really too cold to be out on the field, the grass touched by frost and all of them jogging in place to keep warm, the Café Tropical team unanimously elects Jeff as captain.

“No,” Jeff says. “No way. I do not have time to be coordinating schedules and arranging travel. Get
someone who doesn’t have a four-year-old at home.”

“All right, then, I move for it to be Patrick,” Melissa says. “All in favour?” Hands go up, maybe because they can all envision Patrick coordinating and arranging things, and none of them want to do it either.

“It should really be someone else, someone who’s been here longer,” Patrick objects, forgetting entirely that this was the entire point of their coup from the beginning. But he feels a bond with this team now, and doesn’t want to be the puppet in this puppet regime. He wants it to be real.

“You killed the last king,” Jeff says, grinning at him. “Take the throne!”

“Okay, I really don’t want it if you’re going to put it like that,” Patrick says.

“You’re a hardass, but a nice hardass,” Melissa says, hopping from foot to foot, her breath clouding out in front of her. “You can lead us to victory against Ronnie.”

Jeff winks at him.


My team, he thinks.

Chapter End Notes

Broken Bottle, by Raymond Souster

As it was before—
utilitarian at best
really nothing—

now lying smashed
in jagged pieces
on the cellar floor

it takes on shapes
strange colours

which could never happen
quite the same way again
anywhere
anytime

this suddenly become
unique
beer bottle.
surrendered to that boundless air

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

His mom calls the store again in late November, which is how Patrick knows it’s serious: she’s bypassed texting, or calling him on his phone, entirely. David’s the one who answers this time, so Patrick doesn’t realize who it is at first. David goes through the Rose Apothecary, how may I help you? greeting, and then some perfunctory yes . . . yes . . . we are-s, and then there’s a long pause before his voice changes, goes high-pitched and soft.

“Oh, Mrs Brewer, it’s so nice of you to call! . . . yes, I’m David Rose.”

Patrick’s hand freezes above the grant application paperwork he’s filling out. He watches David; David looks over and smiles, a little nervously. Patrick tries to smile back, but he’s not sure what exactly his face is doing. Inside, he feels frozen, wondering what his mom is saying, what David’s hearing, what David might say.

This could be it, he thinks. It could happen now.

“That’s so kind of you to say! Yes, Patrick’s here, let me get him for you.” He holds up the receiver. “Your mom’s on the phone,” he says, unnecessarily. Patrick walks over and takes it, rubbing his suddenly sweaty hand surreptitiously on his jeans.

“Hi, Mom,” he says, eyes darting to David, who’s watching him.

“Darling! I wanted to call and see how you’re doing. And I got to talk to your business partner!”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, feeling his stomach pulled in two directions at once. “I’m glad you got to meet David, even just over the phone.”

David smiles at him softly, and Patrick can’t stand it, it’s like ants crawling over his skin, he has to look away.

“Well, I thought I’d just touch base with you about Christmas. You know your Aunt Elsie is hosting this year, and all your cousins will be there, and we were hoping you’d be able to make it back.”

Patrick squeezes his eyes shut. She’s been texting him hints about this, and it’s not like he hasn’t looked at a calendar, so he’s been ready for this conversation, dreading it, ever since he didn’t go home for Thanksgiving in October. But even though he’s practiced his lines he doesn’t like it. “I don’t know, Mom, it’s the first Christmas at the store, and it’s shaping up to be our busiest season. You know how it is in retail.”

“Oh,” she says, clearly disappointed. “It’s just, we haven’t seen you in almost a year . . .”

“Nine months,” Patrick corrects, quickly, because that’s all it’s been; that’s all it took, to make him into the person he is now.

“Still,” his mom says, reproachfully. “What about New Year’s?”
Patrick frowns. “I really wish I could,” he says, slowly. He doesn’t, though; he doesn’t wish that. He wants to stay here, to linger in the feeling of being himself a little longer. “But it’s not going to be possible this year, Mom, I’m sorry.”

“Oh well,” his mom says, trying for a light tone. He can tell she’s devastated; his heart breaks.

“But we’ll find some time to see each other soon,” he says, mind racing.

“That sounds good,” his mom says, gently, agreeing to the lie. “Well. It was nice to talk to David, at least! He seems nice.”

Patrick darts his eyes up to meet David’s. David’s still watching him. “He is,” Patrick says, warmly. “He is definitely . . . nice.”

The grin that spreads over David’s face is so proud, so open, that Patrick almost can’t bear to look at it. He does, though; he wants to see it; he wants David to feel that way.

“Okay. I should let you get back to work, then, sweetheart. Call me soon.”

“I will.” They say their goodbyes, and Patrick hangs up.

“Your mom was very sweet about the store,” David says, in a husky voice. His face is still doing that happy beaming thing.

“She likes you already,” Patrick says, because it’s true. David tries not to beam at this, Patrick can see him trying, but he’s not very successful.

“I’ve never made a good first impression on anyone’s parents, before,” he says, almost in a whisper.

Patrick kisses him.

“Who wouldn’t love you,” he says, and means it, even though David rolls his eyes as if to say plenty have managed it.

His mom will love David; she will. So will his dad. Patrick will tell them about David, about his boyfriend, and they’ll get to know him, and they’ll love him. It’ll be fine. They’ll be fine with it.

Maybe, though, if they get to know David a little better first, before Patrick drops that bombshell . . . well, that can’t hurt, either. If they already like him.

“You can go, if you want,” David says, breaking into Patrick’s line of thought. “Home. For Christmas.”

Patrick shakes his head without even thinking about it. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

David waves a hand. “I’m Jewish. Christmas is just an excuse to eat cookies and redecorate the store. I’ll be fine here.”

“You’ll be overrun with customers,” Patrick replies. “Plus there’s the giftwrapping event we’re holding to move all that handmade wrapping paper we got in, and the tree-decorating workshop you wanted to do . . .”

David’s expression gets firmer, his mouth pulling down at the corner. “Patrick. If you want to go, go. I’ll get Stevie or Alexis to help. I’ll handle it.”

“No,” Patrick says, “I . . . it’s too much to put all on you.”
“Okay,” David says slowly. “Now it sounds like you don’t want to go.” His expression is puzzled, but open, ready to hear anything Patrick might need to tell him.

“It’s not that,” Patrick says. “I do want to go.” Part of him does; part of him misses the closeness with his family he’s always had before. “I’d love to be back home with my family for Christmas.” He thinks it’s true, in a way. He’d love to be with them and have the kind of Christmas he remembers, to be with them and not have this news burning and buzzing inside him, wanting to be said. He wants the kind of Christmas he can’t have, anymore.

“All right,” David says, clearly still puzzled.

“I just don’t think—I think I’d worry too much, if I left the store over Christmas.”

David’s expression clears, his pleased little smile like sun coming through clouds. “Hmm. Don’t trust me alone with it?”

“More like—” Patrick gropes for the words, because as complicated as his feelings are about going home, he does also feel this, this pride and desire. They’ve been making money hand over fist since early November, and the store has basically never been empty. People have been coming in from all over, making a special trip to town just to shop here. “More like, I want to be here to see it doing well,” he finishes.

David nods, smiling. “Okay. I get that. I want that too.”

“So, let me stay and help. And hey, if you feel that bad about it, you can get me lots of Christmas presents.”

“Aren’t you going to be getting me lots of Christmas presents, too?”

“But you’re Jewish,” Patrick teases. David rolls his eyes.

“My mom grew up Catholic, so I get presents for everything.”

“Ah, is that how it works,” Patrick says. “I always wondered. You know Hannukah’s in early December this year, right?”

“Which is why you’d better get on it if you want to get me a present for both holidays,” David agrees, nodding, eyes wide.

Patrick wraps his arms around David. “Not sure I want to encourage that particular tradition,” he says.

“What traditions do you want to encourage?” David asks, with a widening grin.

“I have some thoughts,” Patrick murmurs, kissing him.

*  

Christmas is, legitimately, very busy at the store, and it really does take both of them to coordinate and run all the little workshops and events they planned to maximize customer turnout. David does end up asking Stevie or Alexis to cover sometimes, and Patrick ropes Jeff and Emily into helping out with the one kids’ event they booked, since he and David are pretty inexperienced (Patrick) and disinterested (David) around kids.

“Why’d you even set this up?” Emily asks, as she watches Patrick bodily protect some of the more
fragile items from the excited children. Scout’s as bad as any of them, and Emily makes no move to stop her, mostly laughing at the antics. Parents are made of steel. Patrick’s glad David opted not to show up for this one.

“People expect you to do an event for kids at Christmas. Plus it widens our customer base,” Patrick replies, verbatim from the fight he had about it with David, trying to surreptitiously wipe glitter from the surface of the central table. It is really sweet, though, he has to admit, all the kids in their cute outfits making decorations for their parents. It makes him glad that he stayed over the holidays; he likes that the store is becoming more of a community hub. He’s proud that his open mic night idea had kicked it all off.

He takes a few pictures. It’ll be good promo material for later, to put on their website. Or . . . just nice snapshots of his life to send to his family, maybe. Though pictures of kids tend to only get one kind of reaction from his mom: enthusiastic gushing about how much she wants grandkids followed by warm assurances that she’s just teasing and would never pressure him.

With all the events and the larger-than-usual number of customers and the new inventory and the special orders, it’s easy to not find time to call his family in the lead up to the holiday. He asks David if he wants to get drinks and stay over on Christmas Eve, since Ray’s going to be going out of town with Joon-ho, and David smiles and agrees. The idea of cozying up with David and sharing the holiday, maybe cooking something fancy or exchanging presents, sounds perfect.

Then his mom asks him if he wants to do a Skype call on Christmas morning, the way they did last year when his cousin Victoria and her husband and kids were in Windsor over the holidays. Patrick says yes without thinking about it at first, but after he gets off the phone with her he realizes that if David’s staying over Christmas Eve, he’ll be in the house while Patrick talks to his family on Christmas morning. There’s no way he could keep his family from noticing David, fuzzy and sleepy in his pajamas in the background of a Skype call, and there’s no way he could keep David from leaning over his shoulder and saying hi to everyone.

He panics for a while, mind shuffling through options and scenarios, trying to think through ways to keep them separated. But he wants the holiday with David, and he wants it with his family, too, and he doesn’t want to give either one up.

He could tell David on Christmas Eve, tell him that he’s not out yet. He didn’t want to have to, but he could. Then Patrick could maybe . . . talk to his family on his own, without David there, but tell them something, some part of it. Or he could even have David there, bring him onto the call to meet everyone. He starts running through lines, things he could say. He could do it.

After a few days of stomachaches and indecision, he settles on a plan. He’ll tell David on Christmas Eve. He’ll tell his family on Christmas morning. It’ll be over with.

When Christmas Eve finally rolls around, though, David’s dad is on some quest to throw a Rose family Christmas party and wants to invite them all to it.

“I just don’t want to disturb our plans,” David groans, as they unpack the last set of decorations together. The fact that people are still buying these at the last minute is astonishing to Patrick, but then, Patrick’s also the kind of person who wouldn’t plan a Christmas party with less than twenty-four hours notice.

Still, it’s appealing, the idea of being at a family Christmas, maybe holding David’s hand or bringing him a glass of wine, kissing him next to the tree and next to David’s parents and sister. Next to David’s family, who already know about them and accept them. “We can cancel our plans,” he says.
David presses the back of his hand to Patrick’s forehead. “Mkay are you well? Who is this free-spirited plan-cancelling man who looks like my boyfriend?”

Patrick bats him away and goes back to the decorations. “David, we can have drinks literally any night. Christmas with your family sounds like fun.”

He can tell David everything he meant to tell him later tonight, after the party. He can still tell him, all the stuff about not being out yet. Cancelling drinks doesn’t mean he’s cancelling that.

They talk about it a little more, how David misses the giant lavish parties his family used to throw when they were rich, how Patrick would love to be back home with his family for Christmas. Maybe they’re both telling the truth; maybe they both miss what they used to have, at least a little. Patrick decides to be positive and enthusiastic about Mr Rose’s Christmas party instead of dwelling on it.

Which is how he eventually finds himself trying to help David hot glue Mr Rose’s Christmas party back together at the last minute.

“Are you sure this tree is that important to your dad?” Patrick asks, handling the glue gun while David holds a branch in place.

“I mean. Yeah, maybe,” David says. He lets go of the branch. “This one should be good.”

They move on to the next, bigger branch, jiggling it around, Patrick trying to avoid a face full of needles when he leans in with the glue gun. “I think it’s—we weren’t together, as a family, for a long time. Now it’s different,” David says, softly. “I think that’s why he cared so much, out of nowhere.”

“You’re all closer than you used to be. So he wants to celebrate that.” It makes sense, to Patrick, that desire to mend things after they’ve been broken. To make up for lost time. Even if Mr Rose did it in the most haphazard way possible. Maybe it’s worth rewarding the impulse.

“Okay, I think that’ll hold it,” David says, letting go of the branch carefully, keeping his hands underneath it. It begins to peel slowly away from the base of the tree, a trail of sticky glue following behind it.

“Whoops, no,” Patrick says, as David grabs for it.

“More glue,” David says.

“More glue,” Patrick agrees.

He and David stick close to each other through the whole party, and with the singing and the food and the wine and the lights it feels good, feels like home. Part of him does miss his family Christmases after all, his Aunt Ruby’s eggnog and his cousin Hallie’s insistence that they all wear festive Christmas headbands with reindeer antlers or jingle bells on them. But here he has David to lean against, David’s warmth and David’s sharp edges to press up against his own. He fits here, with this new family, starting a new tradition. He lets his head rest on David’s shoulder and watches the singers, taking it all in.

Later, as people leave, Patrick kisses David’s cheek. “Want me to stay and help clean up?” he asks.

David shakes his head. “I think it’s—I think we’d better do it as just us four. I think Dad wants that.”

“Okay,” Patrick says. “You can come over later, if you like. I’ll wait up for you.” He adjusts his plan
to suit that: whispering the truth to David in the dark, huddled under the blankets together, making a plan for the Skype call the next day.

Frowning, David takes a deep breath. “Would you mind if we saw each other tomorrow, instead? If I’m not here Christmas morning dad might lose it again. I’m sorry, I know we planned to spend it together.”

Patrick purses his lips, because that means they won’t—that he can’t. That his plan won’t work. “That’s fine,” he says, after a long pause. “Text me when you wake up, okay?”

David kisses him and promises that he will.

So tomorrow morning, Patrick will call his family on his own, instead. He won’t have to tell David about this whole mess after all. He can just tell his family, at some point, and then everything will be fine. Maybe he’ll do that tomorrow. He could do that tomorrow. He doesn’t have to, but he could. The Rose family Christmas party makes him reflect with nostalgia on all the Christmases the Brewers have had in the past, about the warmth and the food and that strong, good feeling of being surrounded by people who love you. This would be a good time to do it. Maybe he will.

But Ray’s house is dark, and he’s alone, and it takes him a long time to get to sleep.

* 

Seeing his parents in their dorky Christmas sweaters and his cousins’ kids running around in the background of the Skype call the next morning is enough to make him wish he had gone home after all, even though he’s happy he stayed for the store. And he wouldn’t have wanted to miss David kissing him, champagne-sweet, after they finally got that tree glued back together, not for anything, but. He’s still sad he’s not at home. He feels both ways about it, kind of equally, and it makes the tableau on the screen in front of him sweet and sad at the same time.

They talk about all the family goings-on, and most of Patrick’s relatives come to commande the screen at one point or another, and it’s chaotic and joyful and familiar. Patrick feels a little like the person he used to be, the person who loved talking to them.

“I missed you guys,” Patrick says. “It looks like you’re having lots of fun. I’m sorry I couldn’t make it.”

“We understand you have to look after your new business, son,” his dad says, warmly. “We support you. We’re proud of you.”

“Thanks,” Patrick says, smiling. “Here, let me send you some more pictures.” He even sends along the ones with the kids, which make his mom laugh, but she doesn’t say anything pointed about them, which is surprising. Maybe she’s being more careful about it, since he finally ended things with Rachel.

He could tell them about David. He could tell them he’s dating someone, a man. He thinks about it, for most of the call, always interrupted by this cousin or that great-aunt butting in to say hi over the screen. It’s too busy, too much, he decides, after a while; he can’t drop that on them now. He should do it in person, anyway. The next time he’s home. He decides he’ll do that instead.

“Do you have plans for today, Patrick?” his Aunt Elsie asks him. Patrick nods.

“Getting together with friends,” he says, because waiting for my boyfriend to text me isn’t going to work.

“You’re right, Aunt Elsie,” he says.

He and his parents chat for a while, just about the usual things, the foster cats, the store, his parents’ jobs. It turns out his dad also read the book he’s reading now, about the history of the fork, so they talk about that a lot. When they ask specific questions about his life, he answers with fond stories about the store, about his friends, about life here in town. He doesn’t lie about anything, except for the moment when his Aunt Gloria asks if he’s seeing anyone and he says, quickly and clearly, without hesitation, no.

Even with that little awkwardness, it’s good, getting to talk to them at length like this, to listen to his mom’s opinion on Netflix shows, and hear the updates for Tyler and Victoria’s ongoing prank war, and get the news about the service dog Hallie’s getting to help with her seizures.

His cousin Neil, who’s a couple years older and was always Patrick’s favourite, stops to wave at him, and Patrick waves back, missing him suddenly, wishing they had the ability to sit down and really talk together. Patrick has been meaning to text him.

“And please say thank you to David for us,” his mom says, just as Patrick’s starting to think he should wrap up the call. He freezes.

“What for?” he asks.

“For sending along all these lovely products from your store!” his mom says. “Such wonderful things. I can’t wait to try out the body milk.”

“You’re not supposed to drink it,” Patrick warns her, throat feeling choked. His dad laughs.

“I made that mistake too, at first,” he says. “But your mother corrected me.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy all of it,” Patrick says. He wonders how much stuff David sent along, and whether he paid for it, and whether it’s normal for a business partner to send gifts to his partner’s family. It sort of is, he thinks. It makes sense. His parents seem to think it’s okay, from the way they talk about it.

* 

David hasn’t texted him by ten a.m., which isn’t really a surprise given his tendency to sleep in. Patrick usually doesn’t mind it, on the nights when they sleep together. He actually likes waking up earlier and reading in bed with David snoring softly beside him. But he’s still bored, so he takes himself on a Christmas morning walk instead of waiting for the phone to beep.

He doesn’t expect anything to be open, which is why he’s surprised to see the lights on at the café. He steps up to the door, and sure enough, it swings open under his hand.

“Oh, hi, Patrick,” Twyla says, as he walks through the door. “You a stray this morning too?”

Patrick blinks, looking around. The café has about fifteen people in it, almost all of them folks he recognizes from the LGBTQ2AI-plus nights. Mostly younger people, though; no Ronnie or Karen or Denise, but Steven and Derrick are there, and Alice and Hannah, and a bunch of others.

“What?” he asks. Twyla smiles.
“It’s our annual Christmas morning brunch,” she says. “Pretty sure I asked you about it. I hope I didn’t forget!”

“Oh,” Patrick says, remembering. “Yeah, no, you asked me. I thought I was gonna be spending Christmas morning with David.” He comes up to the counter.

“Right, that makes total sense. Because the Roses had that big party on the spur of the moment last night and changed all your plans at the last minute.”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Patrick smiles, unzipping his coat. “I’m on my own for the morning.”

“Well, what can I get you?”

Patrick’s pretty sure Twyla worked last night, and then went caroling, and now it looks like she’s alone behind the counter. “No George today?”

“No, this is just a little thing I do on my own,” Twyla says. “The café is officially closed, but George doesn’t mind if I come in and use up some of the eggs. It’s nice to give back.”


“Nope, not till I’ve fed you,” Twyla insists. “So put in an order.”

“Come sit with us,” Alice calls, beckoning him over to the table she’s sharing with Hannah.

“Just—scrambled, sausage, brown toast?” he asks. Twyla nods.

“Be a few minutes. I’m slower on the grill than George is.”

So he eats with Alice and Hannah, their conversation a little stilted at first, mostly Patrick inquiring about the status of various things related to Alice’s benefits, but then moving on to warmer topics. They all start telling stories about disastrous holidays, until Derrick and Steven turn around in their booth to join in, unable to resist the competition. Patrick’s story about his dad tossing all the kids into a snowbank and accidentally ruining their church clothes has nothing on Derrick’s story about trying to impress his grandparents with a new dance move and knocking the entire tree over, or Hannah’s, about setting her brand-new Barbie dream house on fire.

“I didn’t mean any harm! I thought it had a real fireplace,” she protests, amid the laughter. Patrick loses it so much he snorts.

Which is when David walks in.

“Well, aren’t we all having fun,” he says, as he walks up to Patrick’s table. He bends down, and Patrick leans up, and they kiss hello.

“We are,” Patrick agrees, easily, choosing to ignore the patronizing tone. “David, this is Derrick, and Steven, and Hannah, and Alice,” he says, gesturing to each of his companions. “Everyone, this is my boyfriend, David.”

It ignites a happy little fire in his belly to say it that way, to make their relationship the first thing people know about David upon meeting him. Everyone nods politely, with a few murmured “hi”s.

“Did I miss your text?” Patrick asks, moving to check his phone in his pocket.

“A few of them,” David says, but his tone has softened somewhat.
“Sorry.”

“I was on my way to your place and saw you through the window. I didn’t know the café was open.”

“It’s not,” Twyla says, coming over to them. “Hey, David.”


“It’s queer Christmas brunch,” Patrick explains. “I didn’t know either, I was just going for a walk.”

“Join us,” Hannah says, shuffling over in the booth to make room.

“I’ll get you some pancakes,” Twyla sing-songs, tempting him.

“Well,” David says, obviously torn between his dislike of people and his love of pancakes. “Since you all offered.”

He sits next to Hannah, which means Patrick doesn’t get to touch him, but does get to look at him, to shoot him little amused glances that make him relax. Almost immediately, he feels David’s shoe brush against his leg, and he brushes back, gladly. If David needs a little reassurance to hang out with his friends, Patrick can provide it.

“We were talking about the biggest holiday disasters we’ve ever seen,” Derrick says, from the other booth.

“Oh, well,” David brightens, “I should tell you about this time my sister sank a yacht while it was still in the harbour.”

He does, along with some wild and almost unbelievable stories about Rose Family Christmas party disasters, making everyone laugh and ask him incredulous questions. After a while, David’s smile is even genuine.

“I like your boyfriend,” Alice whispers later, into his ear, when she and Hannah are putting on scarves and toques and getting ready to go. Patrick grins.

“Thanks,” he says. “Me too.”

He does stay after everyone else leaves, to help Twyla clean up, which makes David heave a great sigh and help with getting the dishes into the kitchen and cleaning off the tables. Once it’s all done, he and David leave together, bundled up against the cold air outside that steals the breath from their lungs.

“I thought your friends were very nice,” David says, after.

“Nice?” Patrick asks, raising an eyebrow. “Did you hate them?”

“No!” David represses a smile. “I liked them. Plus they’re all so cute, where was this town keeping all these cute people?”

That’s a little funny, to Patrick, because that group represented a wide range of body types and personalities, but of course David found them all cute. “I mean, if you ever hung out with people who didn’t live or work at the motel . . .” Patrick points out. David hmphs loudly, then sighs.

“Yeah, you’re not wrong,” he says, breath puffing out in front of him in a cloud. “When I first met Jake, he called me handsome and then I immediately, just, ran away.”
Patrick grins. “That’s adorable. Makes me wonder where we’d be if I hadn’t started working with you at the store.”

“Let’s just say that I’m also very glad you decided to invest in my business,” David says, looking at Patrick sidelong, pleased, when this makes him laugh.

*

When they get back to Ray’s, it takes him a while to actually ask about the gift basket. He considers letting it go. There was no harm done, after all. But he keeps remembering his mom talking about body milk, and eventually decides he’s gonna feel weird until he talks to David about it.

They’re sitting together on the couch, David reading a depressing-looking brick-sized Timothy Findley novel, Patrick reading his fork book. When Patrick reaches the end of a chapter, he marks his place and sets the book down before saying anything.

“My parents were very happy about the products you sent along,” he tries, slowly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were doing that?”

David doesn’t look up from his page. “Oh, they liked it? That’s good. I thought your mom would really like the skin repair cream for her psoriasis.”

This starts a small cascading panic in Patrick’s chest. He tries to ride it out. “My parents were very happy about the products you sent along,” he tries, slowly. “Why didn’t you tell me you were doing that?”

David looks up and blinks at him. “She called the store once when you were out. I was thinking about sending some things along, asked her for their address, and asked if she had any sensitive skin issues I should know about.” He frowns. “Is that . . . not okay?”

“I just—I wish you’d told me. Or asked me.”

“Okay,” David says. He makes a face, putting his book down on the table. “Sorry, are you upset?”

“No,” Patrick says. “I’m not upset.”

“Well. Good,” David says. He shakes his head, as if shaking off the conversation. Patrick breathes in relief. “I wasn’t sure about it, to be honest. I’ve never . . . this is new to me. Someone’s parents. I asked Stevie, but she had no idea either, so. But. You can tell me if I’m, if I’m doing it wrong.”

“You’re doing it fine,” Patrick says, moved past his initial clench of fear and anger by the hesitance in David’s voice. It’s such a sweet gesture, and it’s not David’s fault that his parents don’t know about him yet. “My mom’s really excited about the body milk.”

David’s lips twitch. “Did you tell her not to drink it?”

“She already knew that it was milk for your body,” Patrick says, smiling.

“Sensible woman.”

Patrick shuffles over closer. “I think you just got to her first,” he replies.

He could tell David now, about not being out to his parents yet; he thinks David would understand. But he’s going to fix it. Sometime soon, he’s going to fix it, going to tell his parents, and then this thing where David sends them Christmas presents will be fine in retrospect. Then there doesn’t have to be an entire coming-out . . . thing. He’s sure David’s already been around plenty of people who
are coming out to their parents. Patrick’s a little glad that his Christmas Eve plan fell through so he
doesn’t have to add himself to that list, to be that stereotype in front of him.

Easter, maybe; he could drive back home at Easter. He could tell them then.

“Hmm,” David says, neither agreeing nor disagreeing. He lets his hand slip over Patrick’s thigh.
“Did you want to keep talking about your mother?” he asks.

“No,” Patrick says. He’s grateful for the distraction. “You know Ray and Joon-ho are doing that
winter wonderland bed and breakfast thing till the twenty-seventh”

“Pity we have to go back to the store tomorrow for the Boxing Day sale.”

“Guess we’d better make the most of Christmas, then,” Patrick says, mouth just over David’s,
teasing, brushing their lips together, waiting for David to surge up and take it. David does; David
takes him, wants him, gives him what he needs.

As the winter deepens, Patrick gets antsy. He can’t hike, and there’s no baseball, and even running
would be preferable to sitting around, but the streets and sidewalks are always so slippery, and the
road maintenance so haphazard, that he can’t bring himself to run on them.

He plays his guitar a lot, and runs a couple more open mic nights for the store, giving everyone else
an excuse to get out of the house on a cold winter evening. He plays for David, too, when they find a
scrap of private time together, at Ray’s or at the store or in David’s room, Mariah songs that he
requests, that Patrick’s been practicing just in case he requests them.

“I love how you sing that one,” David says, apparently not noticing that he says the same thing after
every song he plays. It makes Patrick feel warm, so he doesn’t mention it.

There’s still that other song inside him, the original one he can’t seem to stop working on,
reshuffling, rearranging. He can’t quite get it right. Or something. He thinks it’s that the song keeps
changing meaning over time, along with how he feels about David, and it means he’s never satisfied
with it. When he finally figures it out, though, he’ll play that for David, too.

The winter LGBTQ2AI-plus nights tend to be a little quieter, a little more sparsely attended; people
want to stay home and stay warm, and the dark is discouraging. Patrick still goes, though, even
though sometimes it’s just him and five or ten other people. He finds he likes that, too, the more
intimate gatherings. He gets to know Denise and Ben a lot better at a couple of them, and gets more
friendly with an older lesbian couple, Maggie and Katherine, who tell really outrageous, amazing
stories about their activism throughout the seventies and eighties. They make Patrick realize how
little he knows about. Well. About his history, in a way.

He ropes Ray into a lot of bowling, which David categorically refuses to participate in, and he thinks
about joining a local curling team up until it’s past the deadline to join a local curling team. Jeff and
Emily join one, though, so Patrick occasionally takes David to watch them play.

“We’re watching curling? Not even Olympic curling, with the cute maple leaf outfits and the cute
ladies with the ruddy cheeks? Just like . . . Bob, curling?”

“There’s booze. And hot cocoa,” Patrick offers, which is enough to get David out to the rink at least
half the time.

“Do you know how to skate?” he asks David, at one of those games, thinking about it as the players
push themselves on sliders up and down the ice. He hasn’t skated much in years, not since he quit hockey, but he thinks it’d come back to him.

David sips his cocoa. “Um. Technically yes? I had lessons as a kid and didn’t manage to ditch all of them. But I’m much more of an avid observer of skating than a, you know.” He waves a hand. “Participant.”

“An avid observer,” Patrick repeats, interested, because it’s the first time David has ever mentioned liking a sport. Unless you count that time he tried to claim that catwalk models should be allowed in the Olympics.

“Sure. The drama, the fashion, the heartfelt physical renderings of musical ballads. Dance for the masses. What’s not to love?”

Patrick’s mom likes figure skating, and his cousin Bobby did it for a while in elementary school, but he’s never paid much attention to it himself; he’s never liked any sports that get judged on artistic expression. Still, it’s something, and it’s winter, and he’s bored.

“Wanna go?”

David looks at him over the rim of his mug. “Go . . . skating? Or go watch skating? Because I am definitely riveted by the curling, so.”

“Either. Both. The first one is easier to make happen, though. I think we’d have to drive to Sault Ste. Marie to find a pro skating show.”

“Hmm,” David says, slowly. “So you want me to strap knives to my feet and willingly spend time in the cold, is that it?”

Patrick takes his hand. “You can wear as many sweaters as you like,” he says.

David, to his surprise, eventually agrees. It’s funny, Patrick thinks, that David bickers with him a lot less over doing things outside his interests or comfort zone these days. Or, he still bickers just as much, but it feels performative, like something David’s doing for fun. Patrick, in turn, has been putting up only token protests at David’s continuing quest to show Patrick every Sandra Bullock movie ever made, and finds himself actually getting into it when David summarizes the plot from his favourite Ann-Marie MacDonald novel at great length.

Which is how they end up on the big outdoor rink that Roland and Bob made by the soccer field, David in a wool peacoat and leather gloves, Patrick in his Gore-tex parka, holding gloved hands while David shakes his way across the first few feet of ice.

“Okay, okay, okay,” David says, concentrating on his feet, letting go of Patrick’s hand.

“Hey, you do remember,” Patrick says, turning around and skating backwards crossovers just to show off. “You’re doing great.”

“Fuck off,” David says, and Patrick laughs. But David does get his feet under him, after a while, and he puts his arm in Patrick’s while they slowly, carefully, glide together over the ice. It’s nice, the warmth of David up against him, the cool bite of the air around them. It’s a Monday, so there are only a few people out on the ice with them, mostly parents with young kids who keep falling adorably.

“Those children are going to end up with terrible skating wounds,” David predicts, way too gleefully.
“They are not,” Patrick laughs. “Did you get terrible skating wounds, when you skated as a kid?”

“No,” David sniffs, “but only because I didn’t fall.”

“That sounds likely,” Patrick says. David tucks his head against Patrick’s shoulder to hide his smile, and his grip on Patrick’s arm tightens a little. Patrick spins him, grinning at the sudden horrified look on his face, holding him tight and swinging them both in a circle.

“You’re a maniac,” David says, afterwards, but his smile has won over the look of horror. They skate on, around and around the rink, Patrick trying a couple more spins on his own, a few little tricks. He never used to, when he played hockey, but it’s fun, to move that way, freely. Maybe he’ll see if David wants to watch figure skating on TV with him, sometime. There must be rules behind that points system that he could learn.

Later, Gwen shows up with hot apple cider, so they skate over and line up behind a bunch of kids to buy some.

“Well? Is it as terrible as you thought?” Patrick asks, as they get their little styrofoam cups.

“I actually kind of love this winter aesthetic for us?” David says, cocking his head a little and wincing with one eye. “You were right to suggest it. Even if it is physical activity.”

“It’s gentle skating in a circle,” Patrick protests. He tries to sip his cider, but it’s too hot; it burns his lips. “I didn’t make you do hockey.” They skate away from the line, back to the other end of the little rink.

“You could not make me do hockey,” David says, skating with him. He can’t help but notice that David’s moving with confidence, now that he’s not thinking about it. It looks good on him, that motion. “It’s so far from the realm of possibility that I can’t even picture it.”

“I don’t know. Now that I’ve seen you skate, I can sorta picture you in a hockey jersey.”

“I bet you can, you pervert,” David grimaces.

“I am going to buy you a hockey jersey,” Patrick decides. “And if you wear it for me, I will—”

David looks over at him, suppressing a smile. “Yes? You’ll what?”

“I’ll . . . do whatever you want,” Patrick finishes, hesitantly, feeling he’s gotten himself into something he doesn’t know how to deliver on. “What do you want?”

“Hmm.” David sets his cup down on the wooden barrier at the edge of the rink and skates closer, managing an almost-impressive little stop right in front of Patrick, but coming just a bit too close, so Patrick has to use his free hand to steady him, laughing. He kisses David, there in the cold, with his cider-burnt lips, because he can, and because he’s beautiful. “I want to dress you in return. A whole outfit. And then take you out while you’re wearing it.”

Patrick shivers, even though his gloves and parka and toque are all rated more than sufficient for this temperature. “Okay,” he says. “Just . . . nothing too expensive.”

“I’ve gotten really into online coupon codes,” David murmurs, into his mouth, before he kisses him again.

It’s really hot to think about, wearing an outfit that David’s picked out, and he can’t quite put his finger on why. He wants to talk about it more, but isn’t sure how to ask. Is it supposed to be a sex
thing when your boyfriend buys you shoes, or clothes? Isn’t it just a normal couple thing? Similarly, Patrick can’t deny his reaction to the idea of David in a Leafs jersey, in Patrick’s team colours, but doesn’t quite know what kind of reaction it is.

He files it away, to think about more.

After the cider and a little more skating, David complains about his ankles, and then about his knees, and then about his hands, which wouldn’t be cold if his very soft leather gloves were at all effective in this weather, so Patrick rolls his eyes and takes off his skates. He drives them to Elmdale for dinner, to a fancy place they’ve only been a couple times before, and David smiles, cheeks still pink from the cold, as he picks up his wine glass.

“Been a while since we’ve been out on a date like this,” he points out. It’s true; since Christmas they’ve fallen into the habit of spending their time together managing the store, watching movies, and fucking. To be fair, the fucking has been really hot and really good, and it’s been cold and the sun’s been going down at four, so the motivation to go out hasn’t been high. They’ve been hibernating, really.

“We really should do it more,” Patrick says. He feels a flash of fear, because we really should was a pretty constant refrain in all of his past relationships, once they got past the first part, the impressing each other part. He pushes the fear away; he and David can build things together. It’s what they do all the time. They can put more effort into this, each other, come up with a plan and a mood board, and make changes. “You can plan the next one.”

“Oh, well, if you insist,” David says, pleased.

For their next date, a week or so later, David takes him to a bar in Elk Lake, where there are a few pretty well-known local music acts performing; Patrick’s seen them on posters, and been meaning to check them out. Patrick doesn’t even remember telling David he’s been meaning to check them out. The artists all fall in that alt-country/R&B middle space that he tends to like so much, and that David tends to make fun of. He’s pretty sure that David wouldn’t have chosen to bring them here on a date six months ago, and he thinks that if Patrick had brought them here, he wouldn’t have sat back, drinking his martini and rubbing Patrick’s back softly while he enjoyed the music.

Something’s changed, between them; something’s changing.

“I thought you wouldn’t be caught dead face down in a Kardashian’s infinity pool listening to this kind of music,” Patrick says, which is a direct quote.

David shrugs. “I’ve heard some performances lately that have made me reconsider. There’s something to be said for music that’s so openly emotional.”

Patrick kisses him, the same way he plays him Mariah Carey songs, tenderly, as best he knows how. “I’ll get you a drink.”

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“We should host a games night,” he says, the next evening, to Ray. “We haven’t had one in a while.”

“Yes, we’ve been bowling a lot instead,” Ray points out. “Next year, you need to join a curling team to get your energy out so we can play more Pictionary.”

Next year, Patrick thinks.
“I was thinking of inviting David,” Patrick says. “Would that be okay?”

Ray gives him an odd look. “Of course?” he says. “You should’ve brought him ages ago.”

Patrick nods. He should’ve.

* 

He’s a little nervous, though, integrating David into his friends group, so he texts with Stevie for advice. She regales him with stories of various games nights that David’s set up, over the years, always with what Stevie calls *randoms* because he doesn’t really . . . have a lot of friends, and neither does she. It’s so strange, to Patrick, to think of having one good friend and mostly hanging out with them. He doesn’t think it’s necessarily because David’s picky, or entirely because of that, more because he’s kind of an introvert and prefers to be in small groups of people. It’s funny, when he thinks about David’s life before, the jet-setting, the art galleries, all those people he was apparently having sex with. When he lets himself think it, Patrick suspects that David’s much happier just staying in with him than he ever was at those big parties in his former life. It’s a deeply hopeful thought.

Still, too many evenings at home make Patrick itchy, and date night once a week isn’t going to cut it. And he wants David to meet his friends, for his friends to like David. He wants to put those pieces of his life together, somehow.

**Stevie:** And he will constantly refer to six as the correct number of people for ultimate gameplay

**Patrick:** I think I’ll make it a group of eight, then

* 

David shows up with a bottle of wine and a nervous smile. “Hi,” he says, softly, when Patrick answers the door.

“Hi,” Patrick says, and kisses him while taking the wine. “Come in and meet everyone.”

David already knows Ray, Joon-ho, and Ronnie, so Patrick just has to introduce him to Jeff, Emily, and Karen. It strikes him again that David has lived in this town for years longer than Patrick without meeting a lot of people in the community.

“We’re so happy you could make it,” Ray enthuses. David smiles in a profoundly fake way.

“Mmm, so happy to be here,” he says. Patrick shoots him a look. *What*, David mouths back.

“So if we’ve got eight people, how are we doing this?” Ronnie asks. “Stick to a game that lets everyone play, or split into two groups of four?”

David perks up slightly at that. “I’d agree that normally six is the best number for ultimate gameplay, but there are a lot of other games we could do with eight.”

Patrick tries not to grin and surreptitously texts Stevie, who said she would play a “David says the phrase ‘ultimate gameplay’” drinking game.

**Stevie:** ha, I knew it

**Patrick:** idk if he’s gonna say it enough to get you drunk, though
Stevie: You don’t know what my units of drink are per incidence

They start out with a game of Cranium, which is a good way to break the ice and also get David to aggressively hum a Shania Twain song. Patrick laughs almost too hard to guess the answer, but gets it out right before the sand runs out. Ronnie always seems to sculpt the clay into something obscene (“What, it’s the Canadarm!” she protests, while Karen buries her face in her hands), and Joon-ho is surprisingly bad at the anagrams. In the end, Jeff and Emily win, which Patrick has to begrudgingly admit is fair given how haphazard the rest of them were.

They take a break for snacks and drinks, and Patrick takes the opportunity to corner David in the hallway outside the bathroom.

“Not sure this is the time for the room with the locking door,” David teases. Patrick kisses him quickly.

“You having fun?” he asks. David blinks at him like it’s not the kind of question he was expecting.

“Yes?”

“You sound surprised.”

“No, yes, I am having fun. I kind of . . . didn’t think I would. But I do like games night. Even if eight is too many for ultimate game play.” Patrick makes a mental note to text Stevie again. He hopes the units of alcohol she’s using aren’t bottles of wine.

“We can always play a four-person game in teams of two,” Patrick offers. David’s face squinches up in distaste.

“That’s not how the games are supposed to work,” he says.

“Oh, I see. That is very important.” He kisses David’s cheek.

“Are you having fun?” David asks.

Patrick draws back a little. “Yeah.” He thinks for a second. “I guess I’m a little anxious. I want you to like my friends.”

David’s face lights up in a small smile, and his fingertips rub lightly over Patrick’s shoulders. “I like your friends just fine,” he says. “In fact I’ve always liked Ronnie. She’s a little mean.”

“That’s why she’s fun to play against,” Patrick agrees. “And infuriating to lose to.”

“Well, then, let’s go back there and win something,” David says. Patrick’s heart thumps happily in his chest.

“If you two are done canoodling,” Emily grins, as they walk back into the living room. Her eyes drop down to look at their hands, and that’s when Patrick realizes that he was holding David’s hand while they walked. He didn’t—it’s not that he didn’t notice, per se, but he didn’t think about it. It felt so natural.

“Um, we were strategizing?” David says.

“For the game we haven’t picked yet,” Joon-ho says.

“Some strategies are universal,” David replies, and everyone laughs. Patrick smiles at him. David smiles back.
“Sickening,” Ronnie sighs. “Let’s get on with the game! I say we play The Resistance.”

“No offense, Ronnie, but last time we played that, things got a little heated,” Ray says.

Patrick smirks. “I like The Resistance. Ray, what do you want to play, then?”

“How about Pandemic?” Ray beams. Ronnie rolls her eyes.

“You always want to do a cooperative one.”

David is strangely quiet and agreeable. Eventually they settle on Pictionary.

It turns out that Patrick and David are a supremely bad Pictionary team.

At first Patrick tries to deny it to himself, but after the fourth round it’s getting pretty obvious. David fails to see the logic behind Patrick’s drawing of “mascot,” and just keeps guessing random monsters, but when it’s his turn to draw, his artistic renderings of “vegetarian” make absolutely no sense to Patrick either.

“It’s like you’ve never met a vegetarian,” David humphs, as he comes back to the couch.

“What! Who tries to draw a SoHo artist’s loft for that clue!”

As usual, Ray and Joon-ho are great at it, yelling out correct answers when the other person has barely made a line on the paper.

Sitting down after another success, Joon-ho pats Patrick’s knee encouragingly, which makes him feel even more embarrassed and annoyed. He’s thankful when the game is finally over.

“You two have to work on your communication skills,” Ray teases, which gets him a murderous glare from David and a stop stop shush gesture from Joon-ho. Patrick doesn’t know what to say.

“I don’t know, I think I like them better when I know they have a weakness,” Jeff says, meeting Patrick’s eyes and smiling. “Your power couple vibes were getting kind of annoying.”

“Power couple?” David says, sounding affronted but pleased at the same time.

“Oh, you know it,” Ronnie says, waving her hand at them dismissively, her scowl like Jeff’s smile.

David takes his hand and squeezes.

Patrick smiles. “We’ll get you next time, Ray. Don’t get too comfy.”

“I’m extremely comfortable in first place,” Ray smiles. “But by all means, Patrick, do your worst.”

They all talk for a little while longer, finishing up their drinks, and by the end of it David’s snuggled against his side on the couch, trading snarky remarks with Ronnie and talking to Emily about planning the decor for her mom’s birthday party.

It makes Patrick feel warm. This is what he wanted: David in more parts of his life.

The guests eventually file out the door, leaving Patrick, Ray, David, and Joon-ho behind.

“You wanna stay over?” Patrick asks, clasping David’s shoulder while Ray and Joon-ho are in the kitchen doing dishes. David looks at him, surprised.
“Uh. House is a little crowded,” David says.

“Just to sleep,” Patrick says, quietly, in his ear.

“Oh. Um.” David smiles. “I didn’t bring my overnight bag.”

“I have all your products. Bought extras from the store, in case you wanted to stay. Clothes I can’t help you with, though, since I’m guessing you don’t want to borrow anything of mine. You should really bring some stuff over.”

“Yes. I. That would—make sense. To do.” David looks stunned. “You bought my products?”

Patrick raises his eyebrows. “Is that a problem?”

“Nope. No. No problem.”

Patrick kisses his temple. “Stay over. Ray will make us breakfast.”

“I’m surprised you want me here after our devastating Pictionary loss,” David says, another smile ghosting over his face.

Patrick nods seriously, considering this. “I think . . . I’d rather be with you than win at Pictionary,” he says, eventually.

“Wow.”

“I know.”

“I mean, if you were at all competitive, that would be a really big compliment. Not that you are competitive in any way, of course, just—”

Patrick kisses him, laughing, to stop the flow of words.

He and David get settled in for the night, navigating awkwardly around Ray and Joon-ho as they try to do the same. Patrick hasn’t shared bathroom space with this many men since he lived in dorms. It’s a little weird.

“I guess Joon-ho keeps a toothbrush here, huh,” David says. Wordlessly, Patrick opens the bathroom cupboard and pulls out a new toothbrush, still in the plastic.

“Oh,” David says, “thank you.” When he’s done brushing his teeth, he leaves it in the cup with the other toothbrushes. Patrick likes the look of it there.

Once they’re in bed, Patrick finds a familiar, comfortable position against David’s chest and sighs into it. He thinks he sleeps better when David’s in the bed with him, now. David kisses him on the top of the head.

From the hallway come some footsteps, floorboards creaking as Ray and Joon-ho walk past on their way to their bedroom. There are a couple of whispers, as well, and then a sudden two-man chorus:

“Goodnight, David and Patrick!”

Patrick giggles. He can’t see David’s face, but he knows for a fact that it’s horrified.

“No,” David says, severely, when Patrick looks up at him.
“Goodnight, Ray and Joon-ho,” Patrick says back.

“Those two are so cheesy,” David mutters, when the footsteps have gone away.

“I know,” Patrick says. “It’s annoying. But they’re good for each other.”

“Mmm,” David agrees, then takes a breath, like he’s working up his courage to say something. “It’s not—it’s not so annoying that I wouldn’t come over for games night more often, though,” he says, huskily.

Patrick grins. “Yeah?”

Nodding, David says, “Even if we had too many people for ultimate gameplay.”

Patrick really, really hopes that the units aren’t bottles of wine.

*

He gets the Café Tropical team together in early March, while the snow is still on the ground, far too early for them to be able to play outside. Everyone grumbles about it, but they all show up, taking their seats at the pushed-together café tables and listening while Patrick talks.

“I know we had to overcome some hurdles last year,” Patrick says, “and it’s gonna take a lot of work to get us all playing together smoothly as a team again. But I think if we dig in, and start early, with some indoor practices and drills, we can get a jump on the other teams around here.”

“You’re gonna try to take Ronnie’s team in the championship,” Jeff says, succinctly. Bob’s Garage had gone on to win the championship, last summer. It’d grated on Patrick’s nerves that he’d left the team before the end of the season. Ronnie had talked about it a lot. Patrick wants those bragging rights.

“You bet I am,” Patrick agrees, and everyone laughs. In the corner of Patrick’s eye, a figure rises from the café counter and comes towards them. The laughter dies down.

“Hey, Gwen,” Melissa says.

Gwen played on Ronnie’s team for a few games last season, but left partway through for reasons unknown. All Patrick knows is that she’s one of the best hitters in town, able to slam them out to the tree line every time, and that Ronnie was annoyed when she stopped coming to games.

“Sounds like you’re gonna make baseball in this town interesting again,” she says. “Sign me up.”

“You’re gonna . . . switch teams?” Jeff asks.

“You’re gonna play against the team your husband sponsors?” Victor adds, incredulously.

“Ronnie’s not gonna like it,” Patrick predicts.

“Ronnie’s not gonna like it when we win, either,” Gwen says, pulling a chair out, twirling it around, and sitting down on it, backwards. “Let’s hear the plan.”

*

David starts staying over a lot more; he even does what Patrick suggested, and brings some of his clothes over to Patrick’s place. It makes Patrick feel good, to see them there, in the drawer, taking up space, but it also makes him notice that, closet reorganization aside, he doesn’t really . . . have that
David staying over all the time also leads to more incidences of Ray walking in on them in the morning, which leads to David saying you have to talk to him in no uncertain terms, and Patrick trying his best to have a conversation with Ray about how they’d like privacy in the mornings without explicitly saying that it’s because Patrick loves blowing David when he’s all sleep-rumpled and just barely awake. He thinks he confuses Ray a little when he tries to get through that part of the conversation. He is explicit about the knocking, though.

“I don’t know how much longer I can take it, if he doesn’t start knocking,” Patrick tells Joon-ho, over tea in Elmdale. “Your boyfriend is a menace.”

“He doesn’t barge in at night? At least? Anymore?”

“Has he never heard of morning sex?” Patrick exclaims, too loud, before realizing what he’s saying. Joon-ho laughs.

“He has,” Joon-ho says, after he’s calmed his face back down, solemnly. “But he’s also kind of. Um. An exhibitionist. So I think it might not occur to him.”

“He’s a . . . what,” Patrick says, not sure if he even wants to know this about Ray but unable to stop himself from asking. It’s like watching a car accident in slow motion as Joon-ho shrugs and smiles.

“I mean, it’s not my kink, but we once had sex in a public park, so.”

“Jesus,” Patrick mutters, envisioning it, then trying not to envision it, then envisioning it again. “And you—were there like—passerby?”

“No, no. I made sure no one could actually see us. It was a compromise.” Joon-ho has a little grin on his face as he says this.

“A compromise,” Patrick grins. “So, like—you, you tell each other what you want, and . . . ?”

“And we work it out between us. Find ways to make it happen.”

It strikes Patrick that, even though David has mentioned the wide array of kinky sex acts he’s done in the past, most of what they do together is within a fairly safe repertoire. A searingly hot repertoire, but a safe one nonetheless. He wonders if that’s what David really wants, or just what he thinks Patrick can handle.

“And you two are making a lot of compromises? Lately?” Patrick asks. From what he can see, it’s been going well between Ray and Joon-ho, the two of them even more sickeningly sweet together than usual. “What’s he compromise on for you?”

“That’s very private,” Joon-ho say, primly. Patrick smiles, a little embarrassed.

“Well now I really want to know.”

Joon-ho eyeballs him, then eyeballs the counter staff in the teashop, who are all a good twenty feet away. Patrick loves this place, that Joon-ho found for them; they have a million loose leaf teas and really comfy, really secluded little booths. He wonders if David would like it here. David doesn’t seem to like tea, but he likes special, sensual experiences.

“It’s just, you know. We do little scenes. Like—it’s dumb.”
“It’s not dumb,” Patrick says, trying to wave his hand in the manner of a jaded man of the world. He suspects it works about as well on him as it does on David, which is to say, not at all.

“It’s like. Scenes from movies or like. Stuff we make up. Roleplay, I guess. It works. We like it.”

“Don’t you feel. I don’t know.” Patrick bites his lip. “Too silly?” Patrick’s had girlfriends who suggested that kind of stuff before, probably because of the times Patrick couldn’t get it up or couldn’t come. Like some kind of extra to fall back on when the sex doesn’t work. He hated it, whenever they suggested it, like they were pitying him, like he was broken and needed fixing with extreme measures. He always felt too mortified to actually do any of it, and usually just went down on them more. At least that way he felt competent, useful.

“I think the thing I love most about Ray is how he makes me feel like nothing is too silly,” Joon-ho says, softly. “Like. He’s the older one in the relationship, but he’s also, you know. Playful. Like, he’s old enough that he doesn’t give a shit anymore, and is just gonna do what he wants. I spent so long thinking everything had to be so deathly serious, in relationships, and then I met him, and we. We get to play, together. It’s good.”

Patrick gives him a half-smile, honestly touched. “So are there like. Outfits? A tickle trunk?”

“Shut up,” Joon-ho says, pushing away his tea and sitting back in the booth. “See, this is why I didn’t tell you, man, I knew you’d make fun of me.”

“I’m not!” Patrick protests, trying to school his face into a serious, neutral expression. “I’m really not. I— I got David a hockey jersey.”

“Really.”

“It came a week ago and I haven’t given it to him yet, but yeah.”

“You think he’ll wear it?”

“I do,” Patrick says, thinking of the deal they made, of how David has been so eager, lately, to do things for Patrick. “I just don’t know if he’ll want to. Or . . . or what to do with him if he does.”

“Be in the moment,” Joon-ho enthuses, with big, showy hand gestures, like he’s a carnival barker. “Follow the fantasy.”

“You sound ridiculous,” Patrick says, and Joon-ho grins knowingly.

“Hockey jersey, huh,” he says, dropping his hands and picking up his tea again. “You’re such a stereotype.”

“Aren’t we all,” Patrick mutters, and, for lack of anything else to do, takes another sip of tea.

“Maple Leafs?”

“I’m—yes,” Patrick says.

Joon-ho laughs at him. “David’s gonna look so cute in blue.”

* 

The thing is, Patrick never thought he could have what he has now, the boyfriend, the work he loves, the friends who understand him, the sex. It seems greedy to ask for more, to ask what else there might be. And it’s not like he’s dissatisfied with their sex life; it’s all still ridiculously good, getting
better, even, as they learn more and more things they like, that they can do for each other, that they
can do together. They’ve fallen into some patterns, based on that: that David’s more likely to be the
one getting fucked; that Patrick’s more likely to be the one getting eaten out; that Patrick will default
to sucking David’s dick because he likes doing it so much, likes how it feels submissive but
controlling at the same time. David’s introduced him to vibrators, and while Patrick was skeptical at
first he’s become a big fan, especially of how David can make him go all non-verbal for the little
green one in his ass; and they’ve been working up towards the fisting that had been their first real
dirty talk together. It’s good. Every time they have sex, it feels like it builds on the time before, on
their knowledge of each other and how they work together. Patrick loves that, has never had that
before, the feeling that sex keeps getting more interesting the more he does it with someone.

He used to find it harder and harder to get an erection, the longer he spent with someone; deep down,
he was a little worried that the novelty of being with David would wear off too, but now he’s pretty
sure it won’t. Or that it’ll stop being novel, but keep getting better, which is something Patrick never
even knew could happen.

Still, there’s stuff David says sometimes, when they’re in the middle of it, fantasies or ideas that seem
to pop out of his mouth when he’s not filtering himself, that make Patrick want to be greedy. It’s so
good, so good with him, but because it’s so good Patrick finds himself hungry for more territory to
explore, for more to learn, for more ways to drive David wild under his hands.

And then there was that thing, with the shoes; Patrick still thinks about that a lot, probably because
David notices every time Patrick wears them. He shines with approval. Patrick tries not to wear them
every day, because he doesn’t want it to go to David’s head, but he always wears them for meetings
with vendors and special store events, and. Well. David notices. Patrick notices him noticing. It’s
what finally motivates him to pull out the Maple Leaf’s jersey he’d ordered for David: the way David
still throws glances at Patrick’s fancy shoes, sometimes, like he’s still thinking about it too.

They’re in David’s room, where they don’t hang out that often, but both of them were annoyed by
Ray’s barging in earlier today, and Alexis is out on a date with Ted, and they’re not doing anything
serious, just lying piled together on David’s tiny bed, kissing a little, watching the end of a movie on
the TV.

“So, I have a present for you,” Patrick says, as the credits roll.

David turns to him, clearly interested. “What is it?”

“You’ll have to open it,” Patrick replies, not looking up, pretending to be fascinated by the name of
the key grip on Mr and Mrs Smith. That makes David roll away from him and stand up, hands on his
hips.

Patrick finally glances up at him.

“Oh, did you want it now?”

“Of course I want it now,” David replies, nettled.

Patrick grins, and kisses him, and when he runs out to his car to get it he has to resist the urge to just
get in and drive away instead.

He wants this; he can do this. He can ask for this.

When David opens it, his face is clearly not impressed.

“You were . . . serious about this,” David says, one hand on his waist and the other hand waving in a
slow, upset circle above the fabric in the box.

“Oh, I was serious,” Patrick says, wide eyed. His heart is beating fast but he keeps his voice controlled and light. “You weren’t serious? About our deal?”

“I . . . may have done some shopping,” David admits, his voice low. “But I did not expect. This.”

“Oooh, what’d you buy me?” Patrick asks. David narrows his eyes.

“You’ll find out in time. Though, it might be helpful if I could measure your shoulders.”

That’s an image, David walking around him with a measuring tape, like a tailor. His hands just barely brushing against Patrick’s body through the material.

“Okay,” Patrick says. He clears his throat. “So, do you—will you wear it? For me?”

“For sex, though,” David says, in a let’s-be-perfectly-clear tone.

“Well it’s not sexy if you talk about it like that,” Patrick says, forcing his hands to rest on his jeans. “But yeah. I mean. If you want to.”

“Hmm,” David says. He sits down on the bed again, box in his hands, frowning, clearly thinking. “So. It would be useful to me to know . . . what the fantasy is? Like, the narrative? Is it just about, like, oh, that cute boy on your hockey team in high school, or like, I’m pretending to be some famous hockey player, or . . . ?”

Seeing the mistake he’s made, Patrick sits down next to him and kisses his neck, just below his ear, the spot where he likes to kiss him. “Look at the back,” he says.

David flips the jersey over, making visible the name ROSE stitched on the back in large, white letters.

“Oh,” David says. “Is there, um. Is there a player named Rose on your team, or.”

“The fantasy is about you and me,” Patrick says, trying to articulate what he’s feeling, all the feelings that don’t come easily into words. “Just. You and me. The fantasy is you, letting me put this on you, because I want it, and because you’ll look hot in it.”

“Oh,” David says. “So, okay.” He pauses. Patrick waits. “So, I’m gonna check and see if there’s a room open.” Patrick grins as David gets up, leaving the box on the bed, and heads out the door.

David can very occasionally be convinced to use the empty motel rooms with Patrick, if he can sneak into the motel office and make sure it’s not booked, and if it’s one of the ones on the other end of the building from his family. Apparently, today, he’s been convinced. It seems to Patrick like it takes him a long time to come back, though. He tries to keep himself busy looking at his phone, catching up on a conversation with Joon-ho from earlier today, sending a group text to his baseball team to schedule their next practice time.

When David does finally come back, he’s wearing his same shirt but different jeans: a light wash, with a lot of rips and worn-out places and spots that look like oil stains. If they weren’t so tight, they’d look like the kind of thing that Jeff wears to do landscaping.

“Never seen those before,” Patrick remarks.

“They were in storage. They don’t work around here,” David explains, and grabs his hand, pulling
him out the door and along the little sidewalk to one of the other motel rooms. “They don’t come off as ironic, it’s annoying.”

Patrick can’t help but notice that David’s intending to wear them with a hockey jersey, which will surely sully them further. It’s sweet.

“They work on your ass,” Patrick says, as David gets the room door open and pulls him inside.

“Well. Thank you,” David says, smiling. “So. How do you want to do this?”

He slides up to Patrick, bending his head to kiss his neck, and Patrick lets out a little breath of air. He’s got the jersey gripped tight in his hand, the fabric slick and cool between his fingers.

“It’s mostly a joke,” he says, running his fingers up the back of David’s head, through the shorter hairs there. “We don’t have to. It’s kind of a dumb joke.”

David pulls back and looks at him narrowly. “How much did the joke cost?”

Patrick blinks, caught out. The answer is one hundred and twenty-nine dollars, plus taxes and shipping, but he’s not going to say that out loud. “I thought it’d be really, really funny?” he tries.

David shakes his head. “Patrick,” he says, the way Patrick usually says David.

He tosses the jersey on the bed and lets his hands slide slowly down David’s arms, over the fabric of his sweater. It’s soft and fluffy today, white and black mixed in odd swirling patterns. The little hairs of the shirt tickle his hands as he goes.

“It’s not that I don’t love how you look,” Patrick says, softly, feeling his brow furrow in worry. He doesn’t want David to get the wrong idea.

“Well. Good,” David says, breath stuttering a little as Patrick’s hands reach his bare wrists, as Patrick runs his fingertips over the soft, delicate skin there. He wraps his fingers around them and pulls up, gently, until David’s arms are above his head.

“Carefully,” David warns him, like Patrick hasn’t taken his clothes off for him a hundred times over. Patrick smiles, kisses his mouth.

“I know, baby.”

David’s eyes widen, probably because Patrick’s never called him that before. It’d just slipped out; he hadn’t meant to; he hadn’t even known he was thinking it.

He lets his hands fall down again to grip the hem of David’s sweater, and uses it as an excuse to look away from his face, too, concentrating on carefully lifting the fabric up, up, over David’s head and off his arms. He’s wearing a white t-shirt underneath. He folds the sweater and walks over to set it on the table. David comes up behind him, touching his sides, kissing his neck, and Patrick relaxes a little.

“Did you, uh. Is it okay, that I called you—”

With a hot breath against his ear, David says, “It is very, very okay.”


“Yup, mm-hmm.” David’s biting at his earlobe, now, a smile tangible on his lips, and Patrick has to turn around in his arms, find his equilibrium again.
“Take off your shirt,” he says, kissing him, digging his fingers under that hem, too. David’s eyes go dark.

“Make me,” he says.

Patrick feels a slow ribbon of want uncurl inside him. “David, I—”

“Um. You don’t have to—I didn’t mean—”

Patrick steps in close to him. “I’ll make you, David,” he says, softly, stepping in closer to him. He puts a hand on David’s chest to feel his breath as it catches. “If that’s what you want.”

David’s mouth falls open—in surprise, in desire—just enough to allow his lips to part. Then he nods.

Patrick pulls the t-shirt off, taking way less care with it than with the sweater, tossing it haphazardly on the table. Then David is standing before Patrick, bare-chested and breathing a little hard already. Patrick runs his hands over David’s chest, over the tops of his shoulders, then back again, reveling in the feel of him. He lets his hands wander further down, gripping David’s ass.

“Oh,” David says, at the sudden squeeze.

“These jeans are really, really tight,” Patrick says. He wraps his fingers in the beltloops and pulls David in towards him, David’s bare chest all up against him, and kisses him some more, touches his skin some more, squeezes his ass some more. He feels wild, like he can’t get enough of his hands on David’s body.

Make me, David had said, and Patrick had, and. Fuck.

“They’re definitely becoming my favourite pair again, when they get this reaction,” David says, grinding against him. “But weren’t you going to—didn’t you—” he gestures over at the bed, where the hockey jersey is waiting.

“We don’t have to,” Patrick says again. It feels so silly, now that they’re here and trying it, so ridiculous. “It’s not—I mean, it’s not really your thing, and—”

“You’re my fucking thing,” David says, which is probably the most romantic sentiment Patrick’s ever had said to him in that deeply annoyed tone of voice. Then, softer, he says, “I like you getting what you want.”

There’s something there, Patrick thinks, something that clicks between them, something he needs to chase down.

He picks up the jersey from the bed and finds the collar. David, without being asked, bends his head. Patrick shivers. “That’s good,” he says, as he slips the material over David’s head, then slowly puts each of his arms through the sleeves. “You look good.”

As the fabric flutters down David’s stomach, Patrick kisses him. David kisses him back, hot, hard, and Patrick wonders what’s doing it for him, here, what part of it is working. It’s all working for Patrick, in a big mess of confusing, tangled feelings.

“I wanted this,” he says, helplessly, running his hands over David’s upper arms.

“Why,” David says, pressing up against him. “Tell me why—oh.” He pulls away from Patrick and his eyes open suddenly. “Well, that’s one reason,” he says. “Fuck, this material is scratchy.”
Patrick realizes what he’s saying a couple seconds later, and grins, bringing his hands up to thumb at David’s nipples through the fabric. It is really scratchy, in that slick synthetic way. He rubs hard. David groans, looking pained and turned on at the same time.

“That’s not why,” he grins, feeling more confident now. He takes his thumbs off of David’s nipples and grabs him by the biceps instead, a dance they’ve done before, walking him back to the bed. David lets himself be guided, lets himself be pushed gently down.

“What’s not why?” David asks. Patrick looks down at him, at the way the jersey makes his shoulders look broad and powerful, but that’s not why either, or, not all of it. He crawls onto the bed, knee between David’s thighs, hands braced on either side of David’s head.

“I don’t know,” he says, honestly. “It just—it turns me on. You look so different. Like . . . you’re letting me do this. You’re doing this for me. Like you’re mine, a little.” It sounds weird to him, weird and possessive, and it’s not—he doesn’t mean it that way, not really. “Not like. You belong to me. Just, just—”

David interrupts him with a surging, passionate kiss, so maybe he gets it. Patrick sinks down into the embrace, into David’s hands on his sides, David’s mouth warm and wet and inviting against his.

“—it’s like you’re really clearly my boyfriend,” Patrick finishes, when they pull apart. “Like no one could doubt it.”

David kisses him again, softer this time. “Shoulda got one that said Brewer on it, then,” he points out.

Patrick considered it; he spent a very long time on the website considering exactly that. The idea still turns him on, even more so now, with David laid out under him in blue and white. He shakes his head. It would be going too far, asking too much.

“You can be your own man. But you’re also my man.” He looks down at David, hoping that he gets it.

“Yeah.” David says, breathless, meeting his eyes. “Yeah, I really am.” His hand on the back of Patrick’s neck pulls him down again, into another hot, deep, biting kiss, and Patrick groans into it, hands grasping desperately at David’s shoulders, David’s sides, feeling him under the fabric.

The sex is rough, rougher than they’ve done before: David grabs at Patrick, scratching his back through his shirt, and Patrick pulls his hair and grinds against him and bites him, all those buttons all at once. They strip each other fast, hands grasping desperately, until Patrick’s naked, and David’s just wearing the jersey, that one sign of Patrick’s desire obvious and bright on his body.

You can’t miss it.

Patrick follows David’s lead, and David encourages them harder and faster and rougher. Patrick’s astonished by how good it feels to take David’s nipple tight between his teeth, to bite until David yelps beneath him; by how hot it makes him when David scrapes his short fingernails over Patrick’s ass, burning a trail of sensation up over his back; by the incredible heat between them when Patrick finally flips him over, gets him facedown on the bed.

“God, fuck, Patrick,” David bites out, dressed in blue and white under Patrick’s hands, shoving his ass up against Patrick’s cock. “Fuck me open.”

Patrick bites his neck and gets him ready fast and sloppy, grabbing desperately for a condom, then does what David asks, fucks him hard, pressing his forehead against the slippery blue jersey,
gripping David’s biceps tight, holding him down on the bed.

“You like this?” he pants out. “This good for you?”

David pushes back against him, just as hard as Patrick is fucking into him, meeting him, speeding them up.

“Yeah, yeah, God. Push me—push me down,” David grunts out. “Patrick. Push me.”

“Jesus.” Patrick pushes him harder, moving one hand to his shoulder to pin him, holding him in place to fuck. David breathes out fast and shuddering against the pillow.

“You look so good like this,” Patrick breathes against his skin, and David bucks, wildly, fucking the sheets, humping himself against the mattress, emitting a long, slow groan that Patrick’s never heard from him before. “Look what you did for me. Look at you. Look at you.”

* *

“So,” Patrick says, a while later, breathing heavy, covered in scratches, sweaty and exhausted. “What else you got?”

David’s sweaty and exhausted too, so it takes him a moment to respond. “Excuse me?”

The jersey is still ruched up under his armpits. His belly is covered with his come. His hair is wild and his nipples are red and used and Patrick has never seen anyone so beautiful.

“I don’t want to give you the idea that I’m not, like, deeply impressed with what we normally do together,” Patrick says, gesturing at his own reddened, hickeyed, wet body for emphasis. “But I have to say that now I’m kind of curious. It feels like—maybe there’s more for us to explore, here.” He kisses him, and David kisses him back in a sort of distracted way. “And I’m wondering. What else we might try. What things you want to do. You haven’t brought it up again.”

“Brought what up again?” David demands. Patrick looks over, meets his eyes, and shrugs, feeling a little bashful despite what they just did.

“You said you’d done—all those things. Kinky . . . things. You made your experience sound pretty vast, David.”

David sits up a little, struggling with the jersey, pulling it up and off his head while simultaneously bickering, annoyed. “I said that to—I wasn’t saying it in a good way! I meant, I meant that you didn’t want to know—”

“I do want to know,” Patrick says. He rolls, with some effort, up on his side, and kisses the round top of David’s shoulder. There’s a freckle that’s always there, God knows how, deprived as it is of the sun even in the summertime. He moves his mouth and kisses it, specifically, wanting to reward it for continuing to thrive in darkness. “I want to know everything. I want—I said I wanted you to tell me what kinds of things you liked. And you haven’t.”

David’s done a lot of things for him, up to and including this latest adventure, but he’s not always great at asking for much for himself, just to be fucked or sucked or kissed. Patrick trails his hand over David’s sternum, thinking about him saying make me, how it’d slipped out, like a secret.

“I . . . like everything,” David says. “We don’t have to do anything else.”

“Yeah. But what if we want to?” David looks nonplussed at this, so Patrick adds, “Are you saying
you don’t want to do anything else?”

“No,” David says. “I’m not saying that.” He gets up and pulls on his sweats before walking to the bathroom, naked, and coming back with a damp cloth. He picks up the Leafs jersey, too, while he does it, but he drapes it carefully over the back of a chair, rather than just tossing it to the ground. Maybe that’s a good sign.

He cleans Patrick up, utterly familiar, washing Patrick’s belly and dick like there’s nothing unusual about it at all. And it’s true, there isn’t; David likes things clean, and is usually the one motivated to get up first after sex to find some wet wipes or a washcloth. He’s cleaned Patrick up more times than he can count.

“Thanks,” Patrick says, softly, being taken care of. David lays back down with him on the queen bed.

“You’re welcome,” David replies. Patrick gives him a minute. Patrick’s been preparing for this conversation, thinking of what he wants to say; David hasn’t.

After a while, David asks, “Is there something in particular that you want to try? More than we did tonight?”

Patrick shrugs, but he notices how David’s pivoted the conversation back to Patrick, to Patrick’s desires and needs. He rolls back over onto his side to face David, rubbing at that same freckle with his thumb. “I don’t know. It’s all . . . there’s so much stuff, and my internet searches have passed the point of being helpful.”

David looks aghast. “Don’t ask the internet about that kind of thing!”

Smiling, Patrick says, “That’s what Joon-ho always tells me.”

“Well, if it’s me or the internet, I don’t see why you wouldn’t pick me to start with.”

“Because you reacted so well just now when I asked you?” Patrick says, prodding. David gives him a dark look.

“You surprised me.”

“So you don’t think I’m up for that kind of stuff. Patrick’s innocent country mind could not handle the dark and terrible pleasures you have indulged in.”

It’s a joke, he’s teasing. David takes it seriously.

“Okay, if you’re asking me to like, tie you up and, and hit you as a way of you proving to me that you’re interesting, that is definitely not going to happen.”

“I don’t think I want to be hit,” Patrick says, still looking at the freckle, still touching it.

David takes a surprised breath. “So . . . you want to hit me.”

This makes Patrick look up, into his eyes. It’s just like David to see two possible logical conclusions and pointedly ignore the correct one. Still, it gives Patrick an opening. “Do you want to be hit?” There’s a long pause, and David’s mouth works soundlessly, and after a while Patrick figures he’s not going to get an answer. “I can—”

“No,” David says, at last. “I don’t want to be hit.”
Patrick kisses him, rewards him, gives him the softest kiss he knows. David pushes up into it, pretty needy for a guy who came ten minutes ago, and that makes Patrick feel better, if they’re both nervous.

He tries another tactic.

“You’ve talked about tying me up, a few times now,” he says. “Was that just dirty talk or was it real?”


Patrick runs his hand down David’s arm. “I liked the idea. I want to try it.” He takes a breath. “Okay, I told you one of mine. Now tell me one of yours.”

He kisses David’s collarbone, to pass the time while he waits, and then he kisses David’s neck, and down his shoulder, over that precious freckle, then down his arm. Patrick’s working his slow way over the fragile, thin skin of David’s inner elbow when he finally speaks.

“I like . . . a lot of stuff,” he says.

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees, not moving his mouth away from David’s elbow. “You said.”

“But with you . . .” He trails off for a moment, and Patrick looks up. David’s looking down at him, expression fond, exasperated. “With you, I think a lot about you telling me what to do.”

Patrick has to work really hard not to laugh. It would be bad and disrespectful to laugh right now. David must see it on his face anyway, because he scowls.

“You hate when I tell you what to do,” Patrick bursts out, at last.

“Sexually! Sexually . . . telling me what to do.”

“So I can’t like. Order you to clean the floors.”

“Ugh,” David says. “You asked, okay?”

That drains the laughter out of Patrick, because he did, he asked. He wanted to know what David might want for himself, and if this is it—he considers it. Considers David’s hands carefully knotting Patrick’s shoes for him. Considers the moment, earlier tonight, when David bent his head and let Patrick dress him. He doesn’t know why he finds it so hot, but he does.

“I could see us doing that,” he says, soberly. “I could see it being . . . really hot, actually. What kinds of things do you want to be told to do?”

David closes his eyes. “It’s, uh. Better if I don’t know in advance. If it’s surprising.”

“Can’t help but feel that telling you to clean the floors would be surprising in a sexual context.”

“You’re such a dick,” David says, exasperated. “I don’t even know why I bother.”

“Because, David,” Patrick murmurs, shuffling closer. “Because I’m going to order you around, and, uh.” He slides his hand into David’s hair, because that’s familiar territory. “Pull your hair,” David takes in a sharp breath at that, “and tell you . . . and tell you what a good boy you are.” This last is a guess, but it’s an educated one, and going by the look in David’s eyes, it’s on target.

“I would be. Fine with that,” David says, a smile creeping up his mouth.
“Okay,” Patrick says, sounding more confident than he feels. “Okay, then.”

It might take a while before they have the privacy and time for something like that. But Patrick’s definitely excited to start the research process.

*

Spring emerges. His parents end up taking a trip down to the States for some kind of flower festival over Easter weekend, so Patrick doesn’t go home to see them. It’s frustrating, to have his plan to come out to them ruined again, but deep down inside he knows, he can recognize, that it’s a relief, too. The thought of going back, sitting his parents down for that conversation, saying the words in his childhood home surrounded by a town full of people who used to know him—it makes him sweat. Here in Schitt’s Creek, where people introduce him as Patrick, he and his boyfriend run the general store on Main Street, he feels a lot more comfortable.

Maybe he can go home later in the year, for his mom’s birthday in September.

Missing his family a little, he finally texts his cousin Neil, telling him about the handmade Guatemalan flutes they’ve gotten in at the store, and Neil texts back, telling him about a concert he’s planning for his students for the end of the school year. Patrick smiles; Neil is a couple years older, and was the one who first got him into music. They did some great little concerts for the family together, growing up. He tells Neil about the open mic nights, sends along some pictures.

*You should send me your new arrangements*, Neil texts him. *I’d like to see what you’re doing with the songs.*

Patrick does, and it’s nice to share them with someone interested, but when he hits send on the email he finds himself dissatisfied. He wants Neil to know all of it: he wants to say, *I arranged this one for David, to show him how I felt,* or *I sang this one because David said he hated Neil Young and I wanted to troll him into having an emotion about one of his songs,* or *This Carole King medley was for Ray and Joon-ho, for their anniversary.* He wants to say so much more than he does. But he’s worried that admitting to any one part of his new gay life, however innocuous, will open the floodgates to the rest of it.

There are plenty of people around here he can say that stuff to; Stevie in particular was tickled by the Neil Young trolling mission, even though she did also surreptitiously cry when Patrick played his version of “Comes a Time.” It’s not that he doesn’t have that kind of support, people around him to hear his stories.

Patrick just feels antsy about it, lately; he wishes he could have that with everyone he knows.

David keeps coming to games night. Their Pictionary skills don’t improve very quickly, but they make up for it with plenty of other wins. David’s actually pretty great at the trivia and strategy based games, and anything where there are labyrinthine rules that you have to follow carefully. Patrick thinks about it again, about David’s deep enjoyment of order. It’s pleasing to watch in action, when it’s not directed at the placement of the breath mints or the location of the toilet plungers.

And now that they’ve talked about it, Patrick can see how that . . . enjoyment might play out in bed. Rules, and obedience, and thinking your way through the system, having someone else enforce the rules for you. Being good at the rules, or else choosing to break them. *Make me.* Patrick likes the thought.

Over time, with more games nights, he and David have more and more fun playing together, and sometimes against each other, too, when they switch up the teams. David gets to know his friends
better, and actually bonds with Ray over romcoms and with Joon-ho over Celine Dion’s latest fashion statements, and he doesn’t even grimace too much the time when Jeff and Emily can’t get a sitter and end up bringing Scout along with them. After a while, it feels like something they do together, something they both love, rather than a favour David is doing for him.

“We should get a copy of Race for the Galaxy for us,” David says, one night, settling into his arms in Patrick’s bed. “I like that one.”

“We can do that,” Patrick agrees, happiness rolling through him.

Patrick buys a copy online, and David hands Patrick cash for his half, and it’s their first shared purchase together. Well. Other than the entire store they kind of co-own. The store is another thing that makes Joon-ho call him a U-Haul lesbian, and Patrick can’t really deny it. But shared custody of a game is still a new thing, and Patrick likes just looking at the box, thinking: that’s ours. It lives in David’s room at the motel, and it means that they play together some nights, just the two of them. Once they even manage to rope Alexis and Stevie into playing, too, and it’s different than playing with Patrick’s friends but just as good, like who they are as a couple gets to grow into David’s life, too.

When Ronnie and Karen can’t make it to a games night, Patrick invites Derrick and Steven instead, and when Ray and Joon-ho are out of town on a weekend getaway, Patrick invites Alice and Hannah. Steven, who is able to properly appreciate David’s sweater that evening—Bottega Veneta, apparently—draws David into a long conversation about fashion, and Alice tells stories about the extremely gay but no-homo things she witnessed during her time in the CAF that have them all laughing, and Patrick’s heart feels full and light every time he watches David having fun.

“I see what you’re doing, by the way,” David says, after Alice and Hannah leave them alone in the house. Patrick is washing dishes. David is watching him wash dishes, which is annoying.

“I don’t know what you mean. You want to put away some of those snacks?”

Instead, David picks up an open bag of all-dressed chips and pulls one out to eat. “You’re introducing me to all your friends slowly, at games night, so that I’ll go to your thing, the thing with all the letters.”

“LGBTQ2AI-plus night? It’s not hard to say.”

David crunches on another chip. “Yes. That.”

Patrick sighs and turns off the water, drying his hands on the tea towel before striding over to David and taking the bag of chips out of his hand. David raises an eyebrow at him.

“It doesn’t occur to you that I just want to hang out with you and with my friends at the same time? Or that I enjoy being your partner in Pictionary?”

“You hate being my partner in Pictionary,” David laughs. “You know, I lived here just fine before you came. I don’t need your help socially.”

“Yeah?” Patrick tosses the chips down on the table and wraps his hands around David’s waist, leaning into him. “What’d you do for fun before I came?”

“ Mostly, Stevie and I would get high and watch movies,” David replies, haughtily, the hint of a playful smile behind his distasteful scowl. He’s making fun of himself; it’s one of Patrick’s favourite things to watch him do. “Or go to the bar to pick up randoms.”
“Well, since you’re dating me, that means that half of your normal leisure activities are now impossible,” Patrick says, reasonably. “I thought it’d only be right of me to help fill the gap.”

“Oh, I see,” David says, and kisses him. His lips are salty-sweet from the chips. “Any other gaps that need filling?”

Patrick guffaws out of the embrace. “Seriously?” he says. “That’s the dirty talk you bring to me?”

“If you want dirty talk, I can do better,” David says, stepping forward so he’s pressed against him again. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to try. Since Ray’s out of town. Since you asked. I brought you a present.”

Patrick’s mind almost whites out. “Dishes first,” he says, slowly. “And put away the food.”

“Mhm. Okay.” David eats another chip, slowly, while Patrick turns the water back on, but when Patrick glances back over his shoulder a second later, he’s putting stuff in the fridge and cupboards with uncharacteristic efficiency.

Patrick keeps his eyes on the pile of dirty dishes, counting them down one by one.

*

David’s present is a set of leather wrist cuffs, soft and black.

“Where did you . . . ?” Patrick runs his hands over them, admiring the heavy silver metal used in the buckles and rivets, touching the soft, slightly worn insides.

“My own collection,” David says, which brings up more questions than it answers. “I’d have gotten you brown, you’re much more warm neutrals? But I thought it’s best to see how you like them first before investing in a new pair.”

“I like them,” Patrick says, swallowing hard. He knows he’s blushing. He feels hot. “So, normally these are for you?” They’re very clearly David’s aesthetic, he can see that now.

David shrugs. “I’ve done it both ways.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, thinking that he might like to try it both ways, too.

“Right now, I want to see you in them,” David says, nuzzling against his chin. “Do you want that?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says.

David tying him up is different from what he expected: he had visions of David shoving him onto the mattress and pulling the restraints tight, or maybe kissing him breathless while he gently pushed Patrick’s wrists to the end of the bed. Instead what he gets is David explaining the signs of loss of circulation and testing his rope and carabiners carefully, multiple times.

“Is that all necessary?” Patrick asks, when David’s finally got his hands immobilized and is still dickering around with the carabiners.

“It’s what I prefer,” David says, archly. “And you’re in no position to make me do any different.”

Patrick blinks, surprised. That’s . . . really hot. “Guess I’m not,” he manages.

“Do you want a safeword?” David asks. “Or we could do red yellow green, that’s a good one for checking in.”
“If I want out, can’t I just say, David, let me out?” Patrick reasons. He’s seen discussion of safewords in his research, but doesn’t really get the point of them.

David pauses, looking at him. Patrick’s shirtless and sockless, but still wearing his sweatpants. He thought it would be good to have a little mystery during the setup part. Even so, he feels exposed, under David’s gaze, like a misbehaving event plan in his bullet journal.

“Some people find the safeword easier to say, or remember,” David says. “And some people like, um. Being able to say no.” This last is said so softly that Patrick almost asks, do you like being able to say no? but thinks it might get them off track, and he’s anxious to get started. All the preparation is more awkward than he thought it’d be, without David doing anything to him yet, with the lights on, with the ugly floral wallpaper staring at him while he’s wearing sexy black leather cuffs.

He thinks it through for a second, whether he would want the kind of thing David’s describing. Saying no, no, stop, and having David ignore him, cruel and distant. When he imagines it, it feels . . . not hot. Inert.

“I don’t think—I think I’ll just say no,” Patrick says, slowly.

“Okay,” David says. “You can also say words like stop, or pause, or slow down.”

“Oh. Hmm. I guess I’ll just leave you be and go read my book, then,” he says, softly.


“Such a smart little mouth,” he says, biting Patrick’s lip. Patrick pushes up into it, as much as he can, but David pulls away, away, leaving Patrick untouched again.

“What’re you gonna use it for?” Patrick asks, and David’s eyes widen. He runs a finger down Patrick’s jaw.

“So,” he says, slowly, “so, it’s uh, occurring to me now that I haven’t done this in a while? Especially from this side? And that maybe we should’ve, you know, figured out in advance what was okay and what wasn’t, because I’m not just gonna dive in and fuck your mouth while you’re lying there tied up without us having talked about it, so.”


David nods down at him, determination spreading across his face. “Tell me why you wanted this,” he says. “Tell me—what you want from it. I can take the cuffs off first if you prefer.”

“No,” Patrick says, because he thinks it’s possible that the feel of the cuffs on his wrists might . . . help. “Leave them on.”

“Okay,” David says, a look in his eye like he’s putting things together. Patrick takes a short breath.

“I like when you. When you lie on top of me.”

“I know.”
Patrick knew that he knew, they’ve talked about it before, but the way he says it, with such confidence, so offhandedly, is surprising, makes a zing of excitement travel along Patrick’s spine.

“And when you . . . go slow. Take your time. With me. Make me feel it.” He tugs on the restraints; there’s some play in the rope but they hold him fast, keep him from moving too far. He likes that sensation. He likes it already. He does it a couple more times.

“You don’t let me do that very much,” David points out. His hands are on Patrick’s thighs, rubbing up and down over his sweatpants. “You roll me over. Speed us up. Suck my dick.”

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees. “So.”

One of David’s hands rubs up his thigh and over his hip to find his belly, stroking there, then up to his sternum and back down. “So what,” he says. “Say the rest.”

This wasn’t supposed to be the hot part; the talking was supposed to be a necessary prerequisite to the hot part, like the form you fill out or the passport you get stamped. Patrick tugs on the restraints again, to feel them, the way they hold him. Fuck.

“So, so I want—David. I want you to take the choice away. So I can’t speed it up, or change it.” He swallows. “So it’s not my decision.”

David’s wandering hand comes back down to the waistband of Patrick’s sweatpants, then lower, to where his dick is obviously getting hard under the material. He rubs the heel of his hand against the base, rough, sudden, and Patrick surges under him.

“I’m gonna ask you some more questions, I think,” he says, his voice gone a little cool, a little meditative. “Is that okay?”

Patrick kind of wants him to, but also really, really doesn’t want to admit to wanting to, and oh, okay, maybe he understands safewords a little better now. “Yeah,” he grits out.

“More than okay, maybe,” David teases, his fingertips tickling lightly over the fabric, over Patrick’s dick.

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees, because he’s tied up, and David can do what he wants, and Patrick doesn’t have a choice. So he can admit to it.

“What does it feel like,” David says, and Patrick’s ready to say amazing, please put your mouth on me, please put your hands on me, please do something more, but David finishes the sentence with: “to have the choice taken away?”

“I—I don’t,” Patrick gasps, as David bends down to kiss his neck, just one small kiss before he pulls back again, looks at Patrick again. Patrick closes his eyes. “It feels like being free. Like. Lifting a weight off me.”

He’s always liked being useful, during sex, being competent, doing it right. The idea of sex where he can’t be of any use at all, where he can’t do anything, is thrilling, and frightening, and he wants it. But whenever David’s tried to give that to him, Patrick has stopped him. He clenches his fists, feeling the pull of the cuffs. Patrick can’t stop him now.

There’s the sensation, then, of David’s hands on the sides of his face, of David’s lips against his own. Patrick responds eagerly.

“Do you want a blindfold?”
Patrick opens his eyes. David’s looking down at him, eyes wide, like Patrick is doing something much more amazing than lying here in sweatpants breathing heavy.

He’s torn by the question; it might be good, a blindfold, but he also wants to see David. “Maybe not . . . this time,” he manages. David nods.

“Hmm. Okay. Good to know.”

“Did you have. Uh. More items on your questionnaire, or like . . .”

“Oh, I have lots of items,” David says, mischievously.

“David,” Patrick says, warningly, deep in his chest. “Don’t fuck around.”

“Mkay. So. That’s hot, and you’re gonna make such a cute dom sometime soon? But that’s not gonna work right now. You’re all tied up. I get to make you feel good however I want, and you don’t have a choice about it.”

He leans down over Patrick, sliding his hands up Patrick’s forearms, pinning them to the bed. Their mouths are close together. Patrick could lean up and kiss him, but he doesn’t. He wants to hear more.

“Tell me to stop, or slow down, or let you out, if you want,” David says, voice so quiet, breath warm on Patrick’s face. “But otherwise, you don’t have any power in this situation. You can’t control it.”

“Oh, God,” Patrick moans, “oh, oh, fuck, David—”

“That’s it. Nothing you can do,” David says, approvingly, and finally kisses him.

When he pulls back, Patrick swallows hard, hearing his breath come fast and harsh from his open mouth afterwards. “Can we—can we do red yellow green, instead?” he asks.

David hesitates. “Maybe I should get you out, and we should talk about it first,” he says.

“No,” Patrick says. “I’m good. Please.”

David’s lips purse and his eyes narrow suspiciously, but he doesn’t move towards the cuffs. Finally, he says, “You mean you’re green.”

“Yeah. Green.”

“And you’re not pushing yourself to like. Prove you can do it.”

Patrick frowns in frustration, because while that does kind of sound like him, he really, really doesn’t want to lose the sensation of the cuffs holding him down. “David. Please. I’m so . . . I promise I won’t do that, I promise, don’t let me out, please.”


“Green,” Patrick says, closing his eyes again, feeling strange and exposed and good under David’s understanding gaze. “Green.”


Their eyes lock and Patrick nods, taking it seriously.

“I’m gonna take off your sweatpants now,” David says, softly.
He does, taking his time with it, letting his hands rub over the bared skin of Patrick’s thighs, his calves. He folds the sweatpants and sets them on top of Patrick’s dresser; then he strips off his own clothes, slowly but not like a striptease, just efficient, calm, and folds them, and sets them on the dresser too.

Patrick wants to tell him to hurry up already, but another part of him likes it, the careful attention David gives to each item. He licks his lips.

When David comes back over to him, his dick is thick and red, not all the way hard yet, but obviously on the way; Patrick breathes a little sigh of relief, because he still wasn’t sure if David would like this, with him.

“Now you just have to take it. I’m gonna take my time with you, and I’m gonna make you feel so good, honey, so good. There’s nothing you can do to stop it. You don’t even have to think about it. It’s out of your hands.”

“Yes,” Patrick breathes, and David lays down on top of him, knees braced on the bed to take some of his weight but mostly, mostly, letting Patrick feel him, his warm skin, the hair on his chest and belly, his cock, his thighs, his expressive fingers that trail up over Patrick’s arms until they’re all lined up. And David kisses him like that, slowly, slowly, dipping his tongue into Patrick’s mouth. Patrick’s wrists jerk as he pulls, instinctively, against the restraints, trying to bring his hands up to touch David’s shoulders.

“Good,” David murmurs, against his mouth, hearing the soft thunk as Patrick’s brought up short.

“Stop thinking.”

“I’m—not,” Patrick says, only half a lie. David rears back to give him an incredulous look, and Patrick laughs, a little out of control, and then David’s mouth is on him again, in earnest this time, slow hard kisses that steal his breath and really do make his mind shudder to a stop. David does it like the other times, kissing him everywhere, touching him everywhere, infuriatingly soft and gentle. Patrick thinks at first that it’s never going to get him off, it’s too little stimulation, the build too slow.

Except then, somehow, it is, it is getting him off, just at a tectonic rate, a geological rate, at the rate of glaciers creeping over the planet, at the rate of species evolving. It’s as if David is bringing his body through centuries and millennia with every sucking bite, every scratch of his fingernails, every cold breath of air from his lips, blown over Patrick’s sensitized skin.

It could last forever. David could make him feel this way forever, and never let him stop feeling this way.

He wants to resist it, to stop it, to end the feeling that’s trapping him here, making him experience this slow, torturous pleasure. He wants to say red and get his hands free and kiss David back, and bite his nipples, and suck him till he screams. He wants David to fuck him, to use him for something, to make him useful. He wants, he wants so badly, to be on top.

“I can’t,” he hears himself saying, sobbing: “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t—”

“Patrick,” David’s voice comes to him as if from a long way away. “Give me a colour. Patrick.”


“Okay,” David says, softly, and goes back to it. Patrick gives in, then, and lets his mind exist only in the moment, lets his consciousness notice only the places where David’s mouth and hands and body are touching him. It’s a curious sensation, like he’s floating in space but also, at the same time,
exquisitely within his own body, connected and disconnected, surging with pleasure as it rolls through his blood and curls his toes, lost from consciousness, everything, nothing, all at once.

“Nothing you can do about it,” David’s voice soothes over his skin with his kisses, a low litany. “You just have to take it. You’re taking it so beautifully, honey. Taking what I give you.”

Between David’s voice and the cuffs around his wrists, he’s held steady, like that, for a long time. He doesn’t know how long. It’s heady, and it makes him feel perfect, being suspended in that place where nothing he does matters.

When David finally, finally makes him come, it’s a slow inevitable wave that overwhelms him gradually, his whole body contracting and expanding simultaneously against David’s mouth, against David’s hands all over his skin. He’s naked and spreadeagled, tied down, and he just accepts it, accepts that focused, desiring attention on his whole body. He hears his voice call out, and the hoarse feeling in his throat means that he’s been doing it for a while, that he’s been loud.

“Holy fuck,” David whispers, after, lying down next to him, a warm and reassuring weight against his side. “Patrick. How are you—how are you doing.”

Patrick’s head feels soft and smooth inside, like he’s been emptied out of all the sharp and festering thoughts, like his mind is still. His skin is tingling, and his arms are sore, and he doesn’t remember how his eyelids work.

“M’fine,” he says, his mouth on autopilot. It’s not an honest answer; an honest answer would have metaphors, imagery; an honest answer would be a song Patrick hasn’t written yet. He works at it, and, oh yeah; there go the eyelids. He blinks at the world suddenly before him again and looks at David. David’s hand settles on his chest, fingers playing with the soft hair between his pecs.

“You want out?”

In slow cascades, the thoughts fall together: that his arms are sore; that his arms are sore because of the fixed position and the pulling against the cuffs; that he did a lot of pulling against the cuffs, at the end there; that David can let him out; that David letting him out will make his arms less sore.

“Okay,” he says. “Sure.”

David kisses each wrist as he unbuckles it, as if he hasn’t done enough of that, as if he hasn’t kissed enough of Patrick already.

“You come?” Patrick asks, freed hands immediately trailing over David’s body, down to find his cock, still hard and insistent and hot.

“Let’s—not worry about that, just now,” David says, catching his wrists gently, pulling his hands back up.

Patrick frowns at him. “You don’t, you didn’t like it?”

David kisses him, softly, and Patrick finds himself leaning up into it desperately, reaching for more.

“I am—not good at expressing things?” David says, hot breath against his lips. “You may have noticed? So I don’t know if I can say this right. But Patrick. Patrick.” He pulls Patrick’s hand up to his mouth and kisses the back, like a gentleman with a lady, like a knight with a maiden. “No one else has ever done that with me. No one else. Ever. It was . . . beautiful. You were so beautiful. I want to do that with you again and again.”
“Okay,” Patrick says, smiling. *No one else.* That feels good. “Maybe not right away.”

He finds that he feels exhausted, that his energy is fading fast.

“Yeah, you look a little—here. Lay down.”

He pushes Patrick from his side onto his back again. Patrick groans in frustration.

“I wanna get you off, though,” he says. “Can I—I want to—”

“Later,” David says, soothingly. “Later, I want your hands on me.”


“You can pick later,” David agrees.

He sleeps. It’s still dark outside when he wakes, with a start, David’s body curled against him, the leather cuffs sitting neatly on the dresser beside him. He’s still naked, tucked under the covers, but David’s in his version of pajamas.

He thinks about waking David up, about thanking him in the dark for what he did earlier, about blowing him. He jerked a little, coming awake, and David makes a couple of noises like he’s stirring as a result. Patrick could move again, in some entirely accidental and innocent way, and wake him.

Instead, he presses back against David’s body, tugs David’s arm down further over his side. David smacks his lips like a kid and settles in, relaxing back down into sleep.

Patrick can tell him in the morning, in the sunshine. David knows more about him than anyone, anyone ever: Patrick can say so in the morning.

* 

When he wakes up the next time, David is propped up on one elbow, looking down at him. Patrick grins and pulls him down into his arms.

“Well,” David says, a lot later, sweaty and messy after Patrick’s extended expression of gratitude. “I guess you had a good time last night.”

Patrick laughs. “I loved it. David. It was . . . so intense. I, I didn’t know how badly I wanted to do that, with you.”

David looks supremely pleased with himself. “Well. Alas we will not have a lot of opportunities to try it out again, since some of the noises you made really, uh. Carried.”

“Well that’s embarrassing,” he mutters.

“No, no,” David says, gripping his arm and shaking him lightly. “It was great. You made beautiful noises. It’s just really a house to ourselves kind of activity.”

“And what about the other thing we wanted to do? The—orders thing? Is that a house to ourselves activity, too?”

“God, I hope so,” David says, fervently, and Patrick giggles against his warm skin. “Too bad, though. When’s Ray coming home?”

“Today,” Patrick says, and David sighs.
“Next time, then,” he says.

Patrick kisses him, and kisses him, so happy: he can’t wait for next time, and he loves David, and he wants to try more things with him, more scary experimental things, to keep saying yes to everything they might be together.

* 

His dad calls the store, asking Patrick where the plant fertilizer is.

“How would I know that?” Patrick objects. Then he says, “Did you look on the top shelf of the garden shed behind the gloves?” Then he says, “Did you really have to call me at work for this?”

“Well, now is when I wanted to find the fertilizer,” his dad replies, reasonably. “And your mom says you put your phone on do not disturb during business hours, which is sensible and all, but it means my best shot of finding you was calling you there.”

“You know it’s not just me here, though, right? David answers this phone too.”

“Oh, I know, I spoke to David earlier, while you were out.”

“You—what.” When Patrick had come back from picking up the new embroidered dishtowels, the store had been packed with customers; they haven’t had a break since. That’s probably why David didn’t tell him.

“He said to call back later. So I did. He’s also gonna send me some more of that stuff he sent at Christmas, it was really good for this rash I’ve been getting. I told you about that rash, Patrick, I always get it when the weather changes.”

Patrick’s mind is spinning, ringing. He feels like someone is bashing cymbals together right next to his ears. “You guys know that David isn’t a doctor, right?”

His dad laughs, easily. He talked to David long enough to tell him about his rash, which, granted, his dad will generally tell every person in the vicinity about any medical condition he’s experiencing with a weird kind of pride, but. Still. The conversation was long enough for his dad to hear the uptilt in David’s voice, the emphasis and intonation that Patrick first fell in love with back when he was listening to nine rambling voicemails about a brand new business model.

“Of course we know that. But he’s a good guy. He says you two work well together.”

A bead of sweat trickles down his neck. Life’s hard enough, his dad said, once, in his hearing, and then never said anything else about gay people ever again.

“We do,” Patrick says, because he’s suddenly fiercely certain that he can’t lie, that if his dad asks him he’s going to tell the truth right now, in the middle of the crowded store and over the phone, he’s going to say I’m gay and I’ve never been happier. He wants to. He wants his dad to ask him.

“I’m glad to hear that,” his dad continues, cheerfully. “Now let’s see—aha! You were right! Top shelf. Don’t know why I didn’t see it before.”

Patrick closes his eyes for a second, then opens them again, disappointed, relieved.

“Didn’t you once look for your keys for twenty minutes before finding them in your hand?” Patrick teases, because the story is an old family favourite and he needs some solid ground.
His dad laughs. “It’s pretty bad, eh? I’m getting old.”

“You did that thing with your keys when I was eleven,” Patrick points out.

“All right, all right,” his dad grumbles. “Well. I’ll let you go. Say hi to David for me.”

“Sure,” Patrick says, because why not. They say goodbye and hang up, and Patrick dives back into work, helping David with all the customers who’ve decided to overrun the store today.

At the end of the rush, Patrick says, “My dad says hi to you.”

David smiles. “Yeah, we spoke earlier. Do you think he’d like that Mennonite cologne?”

“I think he would, actually,” Patrick says. It’s so fucking frightening, thinking about the two of them talking, wondering whether his dad might piece it all together, but at the same time he wants this, exactly this: David liking his dad, his dad liking David, the two of them getting to know one another. Patrick doesn’t know—he isn’t sure if that will last, after. When Patrick tells them. Maybe it will; probably it will; he tries to tell himself it will. But maybe it’ll be different, too. Awkward. Colder. He doesn’t want that for David.

He has to tell David. Or else he has to tell his parents. If he tells his parents, he doesn’t have to tell David, which will be better, he thinks, easier, than confessing that he’s still closeted like some dumb teenager.

The summer is going to be busy at the store, with all the events they have planned; he’ll go home at the end of the summer. September, for his mom’s birthday. And then this will all be fine.

* * *

“You’re—really tight,” Patrick grunts, pushing forward.

“Well, if Alexis hadn’t made me do an entire tree walk,” David moans, pushing his shoulders back against Patrick’s hands.

“You made you do an entire tree walk,” Patrick corrects, digging a thumb under his shoulderblade. It would be easier if he could take David’s shirt off, maybe use some oil, but they’re in Ray’s living room, David sitting on the floor between Patrick’s knees, and Ray will probably be home soon. Still, it’s a nice thing to think about. For the future. Sometime. “And you made me do it, too, by the way, so I’m also sore and expecting a return on this investment.”

“Oh, I see, it’s quid pro quo, nothing’s done purely out of love.”

Patrick feels a knot slipping away under his hands; he sticks his tongue out in concentration as he chases it down and destroys it.

“I do you purely out of love all the time,” he says, in a sultry voice.

David lets out a soft laugh. “Okay. Give me five more minutes, then we switch.”

“Deal.” Patrick puts his back into it. David’s little bitten-off groans are kind of hot. It’s hot, being able to do this to him, seeing his head bend forward in submission. Patrick gets a little sweaty, thinking about how David wants that, the domination and submission thing. He’s been doing a bunch of research and watching some porn, and he wants to try, but he has some concerns. Not the least of which is where they’ll do it.
“You’re thinking pretty hard back there,” David says, after a minute.

“Working on a knot,” Patrick says.

“Ah.” He grunts quietly when Patrick finally finds it. “So, I feel like I might’ve stepped on your issues a little, today? I think our relationship is plenty exciting.”

Patrick blinks, mind shifting gears. “It’s not really an issue,” he demurs, because he doesn’t worry about it nearly as much as he used to. “Plus your little speech on the tree walk was very reassuring.”

“Good. You should feel reassured.”

Warmth spreads through Patrick’s stomach. It gives him confidence. “I mean. But we did talk about doing . . . other exciting things. Sex things.”

David’s head comes up a little. “We did.”

“I’ve been thinking about it. It’s been on my mind. Um. Domination. All the stuff you said about me giving you orders.”

Under his hands, David’s breathing picks up. “You want to share any of those thoughts?” he asks. Patrick moves up his neck, and his head drops down again, bowing to the pressure of Patrick’s fingers. Patrick licks his lips.

“I think it’s hot. Like. Really hot. I want to try it. But it’s different than you tying me up. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t. I trust you,” David says softly.

Patrick bends down and kisses the top of David’s ear. “I know. But it takes me a while, sometimes. To figure things out. To come around to them.”

David’s hand comes up to rub over Patrick’s knee. “You can take your time,” he says.

Patrick reaches down to hold David’s hand for a second. “Okay,” he says. “My turn.”

David groans in protest, but levers himself up onto the couch while Patrick slides down to the floor. They get settled, Patrick’s shoulders pressed back against David’s spread thighs. David’s hands on Patrick’s shoulders are broad and strong, unhesitating for once, working their way into Patrick’s body, finding the hot, sore places, pushing with enough pressure to be just on the edge of pain.

“God. Wow. You’re good at that,” Patrick says.

“So my mom always said,” David murmurs.

Patrick smiles; David told him once that he wasn’t used to taking care of people, but it seems to Patrick that it’s what he’s always done, what he likes to do for the people he’s closest to.

They’re quiet for a little while, then David speaks again.

“So if there’s anything I can do to help you on this journey of trust and self-discovery, you should let me know,” he says.

“Okay,” Patrick says. David’s hands on his back are sure and steady. It’s easier to talk, this way, with David pushing the tension out of his shoulders, soothing his palms over his spine. He sighs and works through the emotions he’s had about this, getting past the excitement and the curiosity and

David doesn’t say anything, just listens, and works knots out of Patrick’s muscles, one by one.

“I don’t want any of that to get, to get into any of this,” Patrick finishes, awkwardly. David’s hands don’t falter.

“Thank you for telling me that,” David says, and kisses the top of his head. Patrick lets out a breath. “I get what you’re saying. You are kinda bossy.”

Patrick huffs out a laugh, letting his head drop forward. David’s hands are so strong. “What, no warm reassurances that I’m a perfect human?”

“You’re a very excellent human,” David says. “And—you know. No other human has ever put this much thought into being careful with me, so. You’re doing pretty great by comparison.”

Smiling, Patrick says, “All right.”

“What would make it easier for you? Or is it that you don’t want to experiment with it at all? We don’t have to do it.”

He thinks about it; it’s not that he doesn’t want to experiment, just that he kind of . . . wants a safe space to do it in. “I think real, reliable privacy would help. Where no one could overhear, or barge in. And it could just be us. And we could work it out together.” Which leaves out most of the dodgy, limited-privacy places they fuck. Even a hotel room doesn’t feel secluded enough for it, though it would probably be fine.

“You could ask Joon-ho to keep Ray in Elmdale for a night or two?”

Patrick frowns. “Joon-ho has a bunch of end of semester work to complete. Ray’s been complaining that he hasn’t seen him. I’ve barely even texted with him, the last couple weeks.”

David sighs. “We’ll figure it out,” he says.

* 

Over the next couple of weeks, they don’t get much privacy at all, not even the kind sufficient for regular sex, not even the kind sufficient for furtive sex, much less for the kind of kinky scene that Patrick wants to try. Ray’s in the middle of a huge commercial development deal and is always at home working on it, the motel is constantly booked, and it’s not like Patrick wants to spring for a hotel in Elmdale all the time. So, rather than being able to try new things, they get to a point where they can’t even do a bunch of the things that they already know they like.

The situation gets so dire that they even end up making out in the backseat of the Lincoln again, now that the weather is warm enough for it, and it’s simultaneously nostalgic and ridiculous, bumping their heads on the ceiling, David’s foot damn near taking out a side window.

When Ray comes into the bedroom one morning with a vocal knock instead of a literal one, it’s the last straw.

* 

Patrick worries that Ray will take it badly when he tells him he wants to move out, but when he brings it up, Ray nods like he’s been expecting this and gets a thoughtful gleam in his eye.
“Oh, you know, I’ve got a great place for you, Patrick, it’s a one bedroom and much closer to the store.”

“You—really,” Patrick says.

“Or there’s a really spacious two bedroom up on Elm,” Ray adds, thoughtfully. “It’s got a balcony, a big kitchen. Lots of closet space.”

“Sounds like it’s out of my price range,” Patrick chuckles. “I know you earn a percentage, Ray, but—”

“I thought, if you and David went in on it together,” Ray interrupts gently. “How long have you been seeing each other?”

“Ten months,” Patrick says. He’s been thinking about their upcoming anniversary, which is also David’s birthday, and what he should do for it, what kind of presents to get. He’s got some possibilities in a list, but hasn’t worked through them yet.

“Well,” Ray says, as if that makes his point.

Patrick moved in with Rachel, once, when they were dating in university, three or four breakups before they got engaged. She got kicked out of her place when a development company bought her building, and he had the space, it made sense. He liked it, some parts of it at least, always having company at home, making dinner together, talking about the hydro bill. It was sweet. But they broke up again about two months later, and Patrick was sure, at the time, that spending so much time together had accelerated it, had brought the breakup on sooner. As if there was a limited amount of time that someone could spend with him before they got fed up, a limited amount of time that he could spend with other people before he turned into an asshole, and he and Rachel had used up all their allotted hours foolishly, at once.

He wonders what pressures it would put on his relationship with David, if they lived together. If he’d get fed up with David, or if David would get fed up with him. And then he wonders what David would say if he asked him, whether it’d be like his I-love-you freakout but ten times worse, whether David would say, what happened to going slow, whether David would think Patrick was pushing them too hard. He doesn’t want David to feel that way, to feel pressure, like their relationship has to take the next logical step, and the next, and the next. For David’s sake, he should hold off.

“I think let’s look at the one bedroom place,” Patrick says. “I think David’s not ready for that yet.”

“All right,” Ray says. “And listen, it’s a walkable distance from here, so you can still come back for games nights and the occasional dinner.”

“Everything’s a walkable distance from everything in this town,” Patrick says, smiling at the little line between Ray’s eyebrows, at his tiny and fleeting frown. “I’m not going very far, Ray. And I’d miss your cooking.”

Ray nods firmly, clearly pleased. “Well. I’ll arrange a viewing, then.”

“You can probably increase the rent you charge on my room for a new tenant, what with the closet upgrades.”

Clapping a hand on his shoulder, Ray gives him a fond look. “That’s a good idea, Patrick. I can see why you make such a good business manager.”
It turns out, though, that David thought they were looking for a place for both of them the whole time, that not only was he fine with it, but he didn’t have any kind of freakout at all, and that Patrick could’ve—they could’ve—done that.

“Wait, does this mean that you were ready to move in with me?” Patrick teases him, wanting to hear it again.

“N—no,” David says, after a beat.

“No.”

“No, it’s a closet space, and a timing thing.”

“Aha.”

“So, um, yeah. Maybe we can negotiate, down the line. At some point.” David’s hands rub over his shoulders.

“Hmm,” Patrick says, too pleased to stop the smile from breaking out all over his face. He wants to keep giving David a hard time, because he’s obviously embarrassed about having been the one moving too fast and it’s super cute, but all he can think about is the easy, agreeable way David went along with all of this, was ready for this.

“I can barely hear your conversation,” Ray calls, from the bathroom, opening the curtain. “Are we sure we want the door?”

“Are we sure?” David asks, and they’re both teasing Ray now.

“Up to you,” Patrick says. “Ray, what do you think, do you have a lot of clients who like to be overheard in the bathroom?”

“Not a question you really want to ask a realtor,” Ray says, still smiling. “I get a lot of, shall we say, interesting requests.”

“Well that image is gonna stay with me all day,” David says, grimacing.

Patrick thinks about it a lot, throughout the day, as he signs the lease, as he grabs some empty boxes from the store to use to pack. That David had been the one who was ready; that Patrick hadn’t said, hey, let’s look at a two-bedroom, then; that, for the first time, Patrick hadn’t been the one leading them towards the next step.

*

When Patrick takes possession of the place on May first, he’s already arranged to have the new furniture and housewares delivered, so there isn’t all that much to move, just the stuff from his room at Ray’s. David helps him, though, carrying one very light box at a time, and between that and Patrick carrying all of the heavy boxes, the whole process of loading up his car, driving over, and getting everything into the new place only takes a couple of hours.

“Wow,” David says, looking around at all the furniture for the first time. “Is this all new stuff? Did you buy a bed?”

“Yup,” Patrick says. It took a fair chunk out of his savings, but he wanted everything to be new, to be his, to be free of old memories.
“You must’ve . . . didn’t you have a lot of this stuff before you moved here? Like. Chairs? Or, or—”
he casts around, noticing the pile of kitchen stuff on the counters, still with pricetags on them: “—a dish drainer?”


“When you broke things off with Rachel,” David puts in, coming to stand next to him, to rest a hand on his shoulder. “I guess I kind of thought you’d put your stuff in storage, or something.”

Pursing his lips, Patrick shakes his head no. “I broke my lease. I left it all behind. I told my landlady to donate it all.”

“You . . . broke your lease,” David says, slowly.

“Yeah.” Patrick raises his head to look him in the eye. “I told you that. I ran away.”

David’s nodding, looking hesitant. “Yeah, you did, you did. I just never thought it was like . . .
Patrick Brewer broke a contract, kind of running away.” He gives Patrick a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Well. I’m putting down new roots, now,” he says. David smiles at him, soft and tender, and then sits down in one of the chairs, running a hand slowly over the wooden armrest.

“This is cute, actually. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m incandescently angry that you did a bunch of shopping without asking for my opinion? But there’s a little mid-century modern thing going on. It’s . . . it feels like you.”

Patrick lets out a breath and smiles, relieved. He’s never put so much thought into what he wants things to look like, before, but picking out the furniture, he actually spent time deciding on things like style and colour. David’s influence, he’s sure; working with David at the store has made him pay more attention to things like that in general, and to what kinds of styles he likes in particular. “I wanted that. Though I was actually going to ask your opinion on the windows? Because they’re really high, and—”

“You need a lot of drape for it, yeah,” David agrees. “We can find a fabric, I know a lady in Little River who does bespoke sewing. Do you have rugs?”

“Nope.”

“We’ll get you some rugs.”

Patrick pictures it, the drapes blocking out the sun, the rugs keeping David’s feet from being too cold when he runs to the bathroom in the night. It’s not the same as moving in together, but.

“Okay,” he smiles.

“What about art? For the walls?”

Patrick shrugs. “I guess I thought I’d get chairs first.”

“There are a lot of chairs in here,” David notices, standing up and walking around a little, looking at the kitchen chairs, the living room chairs, the little stool by the fireplace, the chair beside the bed.

“I like having people over,” Patrick says. David gives him a fond smile over his shoulder.

“The other pressing question,” he says, turning away from the furniture and walking up towards him, “is how to best bless this new space with positive energy.”
“Positive energy,” Patrick repeats, widening his eyes. David steps into his space and wraps his arms around his neck.

“Yeah, like, you have to break it in. Make it your own. Claim it.”

“Oh, I see,” Patrick says. “You mean like this?” He leans forward and kisses David softly.

“Could be a good start, but it’s not entirely what I had in mind,” David replies.

“So more like this,” Patrick does it again, kisses him, but deeper, more thoroughly, letting his tongue slip into David’s mouth possessively.

“Mm. Better. But it still doesn’t feel like you’ve . . . claimed. Anything.”

“You know I don’t even have any sheets on the mattress yet,” Patrick says.

“So we put some fucking sheets on the mattress, then,” David replies, grinning.

They do—David’s absurdly efficient at making beds, a skill he must’ve learned doing it with Stevie—and they fuck happily, giddily, in Patrick’s new bed, his new bed that he specifically chose because it had strong rails on the headboard for being tied up to. Over the next few days, they spend the evenings in the apartment as it moves from chaos to gradual order, David helping a lot with the placement of the furniture, the overall use of the space, the layout of items on shelves, the last few elements of the décor. David even finds some black and white photographs, prints, at a shop in Elk Lake, and drags Patrick along with him to see them.

“I love them?” Patrick says, slightly confused.

“For over your bed, maybe the fireplace.” David smiles. “They fit your mid-century aesthetic.”

Patrick can picture it easily. “You’re . . . really good at this.” He stares at the prints some more. It’s the kind of thing he likes, always admires at other peoples’ places, but wouldn’t have thought to buy for himself.


“Okay,” Patrick says, marveling at the idea.

The apartment starts looking like a place Patrick lives, that he inhabits. It starts looking like a place to serve as a foundation for his life. He wonders where each of his friends will sit, and what he’ll have to childproof if Jeff and Emily bring Scout over, and what he might cook for guests in the kitchen.

He and David also spend that time fucking on pretty much every available surface, trying out the couch (a little too short, but comfy), the kitchen counters (very sharp, very bad idea), the new rugs, once they arrive (acceptable), and the chairs (good height for blowjobs, armrests too inflexible for much else). They’ve spent so long sneaking around and being quiet that Patrick keeps forgetting to stop, keeps forgetting that they can have sex every night they want to, as loud as they want to, without interruptions or time limitations.

And, with the comfort of his space around him, Patrick starts trying out a few things, innocuous little things, but even giving David just the occasional order in bed makes him feel hot, and daring, and wildly turned on.

“Wanna hear you, David,” Patrick finds himself saying, fucking into him, gripping his hips, jacking him off slowly. “Make noise for me. Let me hear you.”

Patrick’s breathing fast and his whole body feels restless and good; he presses his forehead between David’s shoulder blades, their sweat mingling there. “Tell me how it feels. How it feels when I fuck you.”

“God, you feel fucking amazing inside me,” David replies, almost immediately, making Patrick groan. “I love how you do it, how you start so slow and controlled and then, and then,” as Patrick starts to snap his hips, to go harder, to speed up his hand on David’s cock, “ungh, yeah, just like that, how you fucking lose it inside me, God, Patrick, it’s so hot, it’s so hot, fuck me, God, fuck me—”

“Love you like this,” Patrick grits out, “love you, love you, I love you, you’re so good like this, so good, you take me so good—” He can feel the moment David orgasms, when Patrick tells him good, his body tensing and tensing with his high sharp breaths, hands tightening reflexively in the sheets, and then, finally, releasing, David letting out a long, low groan as his body sinks down into the bed below him.

“I love how you fuck me,” he murmurs, as Patrick closes his eyes shut tight and fucks him a little faster, gripping his hips hard, “I love you, your cock inside me, I love it, Patrick, fuck me, fuck me, come in me—”

Patrick comes, feeling his fingers tightening on David’s hips, holding him in place while the orgasm shatters through him.

“So, if I haven’t mentioned it, I am really excited about you having your own place,” David says, a minute later, when Patrick’s thrown away the condom and they’ve both flipped over onto their backs, lying side by side. There’s no need to get up and get dressed, in case Ray comes back, or to shower in record time, in case the motel room gets rented. It used to be a rare treat, and now it’s their way of life. Patrick hopes his heart can handle it.

“Me too,” Patrick agrees.

David squirms around a bit, shifting first to one hip and then the other.

“What?”

“I think you left some bruises,” David says. Patrick opens his eyes.

“Yeah?” He rolls over and runs his fingers over David’s left hip. It’s hard to tell now, but certainly those spots are reddened where Patrick dug his fingers in, and might bruise up. Patrick bends his head and kisses one of his own fingerprints, then comes back up to lie beside him again.

“You like it when you do that to me,” David says, softly.

Patrick breathes out, shuddering, because there’s a complex knot of emotions inside him about this, that he’s not sure how to articulate. “Yeah,” he agrees, since that’s a start, and it’s true. He likes seeing marks he’s made on David’s body; it’s like the hockey jersey, a sign that he’s been there.

“I like it too,” David puts in, which helps, a lot. He meets his eyes.

“What do you like about it?”

David takes a deep breath, grimacing. “I told you before. I like you telling me what to do.”

“I think I really like it too,” Patrick breathes. He slides his hand along David’s hip again. “But this
isn’t telling.”

“Pushing me around, putting me where you want me, telling me what to do, making me do it if I
don’t,” David sing-songs out the little list, voice light and high. “It’s all the same button.”

Patrick kisses him, helplessly. “You said you didn’t like to be hit.”

“No,” David says. “Just. Taken.” He clears his throat, then adds, “Wanted.”

“Okay.” Patrick feels that odd little knot of emotion inside him start to unravel, as he thinks about
that, and he feels like he can see more and more of it as he works through what David’s said. “You
know I want you all the time, right.”


“Guess we’ve got all the privacy we could need, now,” Patrick says, and that’s a little scary, too, that
there’s nothing to hold them back from trying all these new things.

“I guess so,” David agrees.

*

The bell rings above the door, and it’s one of the kids. That’s how Patrick thinks of them, anyway, as
one of the group of kids who had been stealing stuff, got rumbled by Alexis, and got chased out.
Now, if any of them want to come in, Patrick makes them come one at a time, leave their bags and
hoodies at the counter, and watches them like a hawk. David just doesn’t let them come in at all,
which is probably the better choice, even if it’s only because he feels betrayed by their false
compliments. But Patrick remembers what it’s like to live in a small town with literally nothing to do.
Walking around a very non-teenager-friendly store and buying breath mints is at least better than
doing meth out behind that same store.

Patrick points, and the kid takes off his backpack and hands it over. He’s wearing a t-shirt, no
hoodie, so unless he stuffs face cream down his pants, there should be no danger. Patrick watches
him anyway, dusting and rearranging product near wherever the kid happens to be. After a while, it
becomes clear that he’s actually reading the labels of stuff, not just wasting time until his friends
decide to come meet him.

“Are you—looking for something?” Patrick asks, surprised.

The kid looks up at him. “It’s my mom’s birthday,” he says. Patrick nods; that’s actually a legitimate
reason for a teenager to be in their store.

“You want some help? What does she like?”

The kid frowns. “I don’t know. Mom stuff.”

“Uh-huh.” Patrick shows him some generic stuff that moms might like, and eventually the kid picks
out some candles and bath bombs.

“Now, the important part is, you’ll have to come up to the counter and pay for these,” Patrick says,
because he can’t quite resist it. The kid looks appropriately ashamed, which is gratifying.

“I’m, uh, sorry we stole stuff from you guys. It was mostly Kevin’s idea.”

“Isn’t it always.” Patrick rings up the stuff and the kid hands over his debit card. “I should bill you
for it now."

"Um, please don’t, I only have thirty bucks in there." That’s actually kind of sweet; the present for
his mom comes out to twenty-seven. “School will be out soon. I could—work it off, or something. If
you wanted.”

Patrick looks up at him, surprised. It’s a tempting offer; it’d be nice to have someone else to sweep
the floors and clean the windows. But David would kill him, and Patrick himself isn’t about to be
swayed by a contrite expression and a promise from this kid.

“Tell you what, why don’t you work somewhere else, get some money, and then come pay me back,
instead.” He hands over the bag. The kid takes it, nodding.

“That’s fair.” Patrick expects the kid to leave, but he doesn’t, fidgeting with the handle of the tote
bag. “You and that other guy who run the store. You’re gay, right?”

Patrick feels an immediate and almost overwhelming urge to say no, a leftover survival instinct
coming from somewhere deep and dark inside. He’s gotten more and more comfortable with being
out, but he’s done it mostly around adults, not in the face of teenaged boys. He’s been a teenaged
boy; he’s watched teenaged boys tear to pieces anyone they thought was even a little vulnerable.

In school, he always worked hard to make sure he wasn’t vulnerable, not in any way. Friendly, easy-
going Patrick, plays sports, gets good grades, dates pretty girls, doesn’t get mad, doesn’t get riled up.
It’s an entirely new sensation to realize that there’s something about him that a teenaged boy could
attack. It makes him feel incredibly stupid, to be in his thirties and afraid of what a kid might say, but
he is, and it’s ridiculous, and it’s terrible.

“Yeah,” he says, after a few seconds. “I’m gay.”

The kid nods, way too fast. “Cool, that’s cool. I’m not gay, but that’s cool. Isn’t the other guy—don’t
you—”

“We’re together. David’s pansexual,” Patrick says, absolutely sure that David would not want him to
say it, but having no idea what else to do.

“What’s that?” The kid’s fingers are still fidgeting with the tote bag straps.

“It’s, uh, when you like all different genders. Not just men.” He hopes to hell that the kid doesn’t
quiz him on all the different genders; Patrick gets that there are more than two but wouldn’t know
how to explain it from scratch without using the wrong words.

“Oh, ok, yeah.” Another swift nod, looking down at the counter. He still doesn’t leave, and after a
long, long minute, Patrick realizes that the kid may not have been entirely truthful just now, when he
said he wasn’t gay.

“Did you, uh.” Patrick has no idea what he’s supposed to do with this. “Did you have other
questions?” He winces, involuntarily.

“No, no, it’s cool, man, just curious. I mean. Just asking.”

“All right.”

“I’m gonna get you that money,” he says.

“Just don’t steal it from somewhere else.”
The kid laughs, shakes his head. “I won’t. I don’t do that stuff anymore. Kevin’s sort of a douchebag.”

“Sounds like it.”

As the kid takes steps away from the counter and towards the door, Patrick calls out to stop him.

“Hey, kid,” he says. “What’s your name?”

“Um. Gabe.”

“I’m Patrick. Brewer.”

Gabe nods.

“You’re forgetting your backpack.” Patrick hands it over the counter. Gabe comes and takes it.

“Thanks, uh. Mr Brewer,” he says, and leaves. The bell dings behind him.

“What the fuck,” Patrick says, to the empty store.

* *

“Oh, I wanted to tell you,” Patrick says, later that day, looking up from his book. “So. So this kid came in? One of the kids who was stealing from us.”

They’re curled up on Patrick’s couch together. David’s doesn’t look up from the magazine he’s flipping through.

“You have got to stop letting those lying hooligans in the store.”

“I know your position on this. He actually bought something, though, and paid for it.”

“Wait, which kid was this?”

“The skinny one, blond hair, blue backpack.”

“Oh,” David says, nodding. “The gay one. What did he buy?”

Patrick feels like he got the wind knocked out of him. “You―how did you know that?”

David looks up and raises an eyebrow. “I . . . uh. Practice?” He seems to notice that Patrick is actually bothered by this, and furrows his brow at him. “I mean. He clearly had a crush on one of the other ones, to start with, teenagers are not subtle. And he was the only one who sounded sincere when he was, like, complimenting my hair.”

“You knew the others weren’t sincere when they were complimenting your hair and you let them do it anyway?”

“We’re getting sidetracked. We were talking about how you didn’t know he was gay. Did he tell you he was gay, was that the thing?”

“No. But he asked me if I was. If—if we were.”

“Oh.” David seems to take that in stride. “Makes sense.” He looks at Patrick sidelong. “Does this mean you’re going to take him under your wing and nurture him?”
“No,” Patrick says. “I told him to pay us back the money he owes us from the stuff he stole.”

“Ah, so you’re just going to teach him responsibility.”

“I’m going to recoup our losses—”

“Going to help him build trust with an out gay adult, so he finally has some stability in his young queer life.”

“I’m considering banning him from the store outright until he pays up.”

“Mm-hmm. Giving him consequences, the therapists say that’s very important. Not nurturing at all.”

“I can’t nurture anyone!”

“You’re such a traditional dad.” David’s outright laughing at him now, his shoulders shaking with glee. “Seriously, I think it’s cute. And probably good. Imagine if you’d had a Patrick when you were a little Patrick.”

That thought knocks him back. He can’t quite imagine it, can’t imagine being brave enough to ask a random stranger about his sexuality while casually mentioning that he is not, himself, gay. He can very easily imagine hanging around that random stranger, though, being interested in them, wanting to hear about them.

“I knew gay people, as a kid.”

“How many?” David asks, clearly curious.

“One,” Patrick admits. “I had a gay friend on Student Council.”

“Student Council, wow. So, what was her name?”

Patrick narrows his eyes at him. “Amanda,” he says, through gritted teeth.

David leans over and kisses him, softly. “I bet you helped her do like. Gay fundraising. For marriage equality, or something.”

“Youth LGBT helpline,” Patrick corrects him, and kisses David back, just to shut him up. “We had marriage equality already when I was in high school, because of how I’m so much younger than you.”

“Mmm, sounds like you were a real ally to the community.”

Patrick kisses him again, pushing him down on the couch, forcing him to drop the magazine he was reading. “I’ll show you allyship,” Patrick mutters, which just makes David laugh, then continue to giggle periodically for the first half of his blowjob.

* 

The next day, Patrick feels restless in the early hours of the morning, so he leaves a note on David’s chest calculated to make him happy and annoyed in equal measure (gone for a hike, will open the store, you’re too cute to wake up when you’re snoring) and heads up to Roberts Point. He hasn’t been in a while, and it’s quiet this early on a weekday, except for one jogger with her earphones in and a guy walking a rambunctious terrier. He’s still thinking about what David said the day before, about having a Patrick when he was a little Patrick. It’s a cute way to put it, but Patrick doesn’t know if he’s that different from who he used to be. Standing up on the lookout point, he thinks about who
he was a year ago, when he sat here with Ben, sharing his trail mix and breathless with the idea that he could kiss a man. He’s not ready to be a role model, surely. Surely no one could expect him to be.

There must be something else he can do for the kid. Organize something for him, or for kids like him, so he’s got real role models to look up to. People who have their shit together. People who, for instance, have come out to their parents.

After, he showers at home—David is still snoring—and treats himself to breakfast at the café.

“Oh, Patrick!” Twyla says, when she sees him. “Hang on.” She ducks into the back, where he assumes the employee breakroom is, and comes back with the book he loaned her, The Path Between the Seas. He’d forgotten about it.

“Told me ages to get around to reading it, but once I did I zoomed through. I really liked it. The way he describes the whole project, how much of an undertaking it was! It’s hard to imagine us doing something like that now.”

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees, surprised into a smile. That’s what struck him about the book, too, the idea of building the Panama Canal and how completely bonkers and huge it’d seemed at the time. “You really get a sense for the scale of it, the way he goes through it.”

“I liked it. Now I kinda wanna read more books about stuff like that.”

“I’m reading one right now on how this one guy invented a way to determine longitude at sea. It’s called Longitude. I can loan it to you when I’m done.”

“Hmm.” She grabs a mug from the stack and sets it in front of him, then starts the hot water pouring into the little metal pot for his tea. He didn’t order a tea, not yet, but she’s making it for him anyway. “That sounds neat. You know, it almost feels like we should have a little book club!”

“That . . . could be nice,” Patrick says. “For nonfiction? I don’t read a lot of fiction.”

“Yeah. History stuff. I could probably rope a couple other people in. Do you know Denise? She’s always in here with a book, in a booth by herself.”

“Yeah, I know Denise,” Patrick says. “We should ask her.” He licks his lips. He wonders if Twyla would know the answer to the question that’s riding around in the back of his mind.

“We can announce it at the next shindig,” Twyla suggests, and Patrick figures that’s as good an opening as he’s likely to get. She sets his tea in front of him, and he drops the bag into the water.

“Speaking of,” Patrick says. “I was thinking about the shindig. About how it’s great for the adults, but. I guess I was wondering if there were any . . . any get-togethers like that around here for kids.”

Twyla frowns. “Kids are welcome at the shindigs,” she says. “You want scrambled, brown toast, sausage?”

He smiles. He only comes in for breakfast now and again, but she remembers his order, now. “Yeah, that sounds good. And I don’t mean people bringing their own kids to the shindig, I mean like . . . queer, queer kids. LGBTQ2AI-plus kids. Someplace they can go and, I don’t know. Talk.”

“Ohhh,” Twyla says, slowly. She turns and puts Patrick’s order on the board for George. “I don’t think so. At least, there wasn’t anything when I was in high school, and I haven’t heard of it from any of the parents around here. Do you think we need one?”
Patrick shrugs. “Maybe. I might know a kid who could use it.”

Twyla nods. There are a couple of people at the other end of the counter waving for her attention, and she gives Patrick an anxious frown.

“Go, go,” Patrick says.

“I’ll think about it,” Twyla promises, before dashing off to serve people coffee.

Later, when Patrick’s almost done eating and the rush has died down, Twyla comes back over and folds her arms on the countertop in front of him. “You should ask Derrick,” she says.

“Derrick?” Patrick replies.

“About resources for queer kids. He teaches dance at the high school. Maybe he could help you set something up.”

Patrick nods, thinking it through. Derrick’s the kind of guy who has his life together. He’ll ask Derrick, next time he sees him.

* 

“I’m gonna throw a housewarming party,” Patrick tells Jeff, at their next secret baseball practice. It’s warmer now, so it’s being held in the lot out behind the café. It’s pretty secluded, but Patrick doesn’t think their secret will be safe for much longer. He just hopes all the drills have got them to a place where they can compete with the other teams.

“Oh yeah? Am I invited?” Jeff tosses the ball, and Patrick catches it, then throws it back.

“In fact, this is your official invitation,” Patrick says. “Bring Emily. But the theme is high school slumber party, so Scout might be a little too young. You wanna go deeper?”

Jeff jogs a little further away. “We’ll try to find a sitter.”

Patrick throws, getting the new range; he’s a little short, and Jeff has to field it. “But I want it known that you’re only invited if you promise not to slug anyone at the party. I think that guy Trevor? Who Steven used to date? Actually is a physics teacher, so have some restraint.”

“I promise not to regress that much.” Jeff throws back, up in the air to imitate a pop fly; Patrick gets underneath it, lets it thock itself in perfectly. “So why that theme?”

Patrick shrugs. He hasn’t thought about it much; it just seemed like a fun theme to get people to let loose a little. Not that he had, himself, particularly, let loose in high school. To put it mildly. Open mic nights and team parties had been about the limit of it. And that one time under the train trestle with the shop kids.

He spins the ball in his fingers a few times, feeling the different positions of the laces. “I . . . guess I’ve been thinking about it lately. Who I was. What I’d change. If I had it to do over again.”

Jeff misses that one, letting it bounce out of his glove. “Besides everything?” he laughs. He picks the ball up.

“Yeah.”

“I mean. Actually, I don’t know. This is how I got here, y’know? Maybe I could’ve been happier
back then. Or, I mean, I know I could’ve been happier back then, but. I’m happy now. My path is just . . . my path.”

Patrick nods. Jeff whips the next one past him, fast, and Patrick just barely gets leather on it in time.

“Got heat on there,” Patrick says, admiringly. “We’ll make you a pitcher yet.”

“God, stop with that,” Jeff moans. “I’m not ready to be a pitcher. I’ll be much happier in the outfield, like usual.”

“Nope,” Patrick says. “Gotta push harder than that, if we’re gonna win.”

“Careful, you’re gonna start sounding like Jack.”

“Hey,” Patrick says, startled.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Okay. Give me the ball.”

Patrick tosses it back, nice and easy, then drops down to a catcher’s stance. “C’mon, man. Show me another. Strike. Right here.” He pounds his glove.

Jeff sighs at him, but then takes it seriously, winding up and whipping it in.

“Strike one,” Patrick says, grinning.

*

The housewarming party ends up being a little more authentically high school than Patrick intended.

And sure, he can admit that he overreacted a little, to the whole Ted-kissing-David thing. That doesn’t mean that David has to keep pushing it afterwards, or be so clearly delighted by the idea of Patrick being jealous. But it occurs to Patrick, mid-argument, that there’s no edge of anger or upset to David’s voice, that it’s all play, all the way down, the way David never used to be. That he’s not at all afraid that Patrick might take a ride with Ted and start a vet clinic somewhere. It doesn’t feel like that long ago that David was concerned about Patrick having lunch with Joon-ho, and now he’s just. Not.

“Hey,” he says, leaving the argument behind, wrapping his arms around David’s waist. “What do you think would’ve happened, if we’d met in high school?”

David makes his self-deprecating preparatory hum, then gives a description of himself in high school that Patrick immediately, without hesitation, resolves to find pictures of.

Still, even the idea of David weighted down with pacifier necklaces doesn’t slow his train of thought, barreling past station after station: what if it’d happened differently. What if I’d been different. What if I’d known. What if I could’ve been further along by now.

If he’d known then, he wouldn’t be behind now, still waiting to come out to his parents.

When David gets back from taking out the garbage, he’s still crowing about the jealousy thing.

“I’m just wondering, you know, can I expect this on a regular basis, like if Twyla touches my hand while she’s handing me a coffee, or if the maple syrup guy offers me a taste of the product . . . ?”

It finally snaps into place, what David’s doing. Why he’s teasing. Trying to provoke him. To make him show David how much he wants him. Patrick likes it, and for one long breath, he thinks about
going along with it. He could throw David to the bed and strip him down and show him how much he wants him. Patrick considers it. Then he purses his lips and shakes his head.

“Okay,” he says, annoyed and turned on. “Okay.” He gets one hand on David’s shoulder, and one in David’s hair, and pushes him back against the wall, kissing him fiercely. He lets his hand form into a fist, pulling tight. David groans against him.

“That what you’re angling for?” Patrick says, against David’s mouth.

“Um,” David says, clearly caught between embarrassed and well-kissed. Patrick kisses him again, still rough and hard, for good measure, and holds him up when he goes a little weak at the knees. It brings a hot sense of satisfaction to Patrick’s belly, that moment, that feeling, David’s weight against him.

He pulls back, then, and waits for David to blink his eyes open, to stand up straight, before he turns and walks away. He starts putting out the candles in the fireplace.

David comes up next to him. “So, I didn’t . . . mean that,” he says. “Not consciously, at least.”

“You know how much I wanted to fuck you down into the mattress, just now?” Patrick asks, conversationally.

“Um. From that kiss, I’m guessing, like, a lot?”

“A lot, yeah. But I don’t want . . . the internet says you shouldn’t do domination games about your real fights, or whatever.”

“I can’t believe you’re still asking the internet these questions.”

“Seems like pretty solid advice, in this case, David.”

“Was that a real fight, though?” David asks. Patrick shrugs, turns to face him.

“Felt real enough. Not serious, but. Real. And also . . .” he takes a moment to try to translate the emotion he’s feeling into words. “I don’t like feeling jealous. I don’t like feeling angry at you, even a little. I don’t want it to be part of our sex life. You pushing my buttons to get me to do something to you, I don’t like that idea.”

“Okay,” David says, nodding. “Okay, I get that.” He blows out a breath. “I know you’ve been worried about that. And I think I might have some . . . bad habits. Old habits. Leftover from other, other people. And I should probably think about that, a little more.”

“Bianca?” Patrick asks. “James?”

David gives him a surprised look, like he didn’t anticipate that Patrick would remember all his terrible relationship stories. “Um. Both, I guess,” he says. “It was never not a game with them.”

Patrick nods, waiting. After a moment, David speaks again.

“I guess—I’ve been thinking about it a lot, lately, since you’ve been trying out the occasional dom moment in bed. It’s been so hot, and I just keep thinking about it, all the little things you’ve been doing.”

“I’ve been practicing,” Patrick breathes, smiling a little.

“You practicing has been very hot,” David intones. “And so I guess it’s—the way I used to do it,
with, with them, it always bled out into the rest of the relationship. It wasn’t . . . contained.”

“Did you like that?” Patrick tries to keep his voice neutral.

David closes his eyes tight for a second, then opens them and shakes his head. “No. I didn’t.”

“So, let’s definitely not replicate that,” Patrick says, sighing in relief, taking his hand.

“We won’t,” David says, emphatically. “I want this to be . . . just us. What we want together.” He purses his lips and looks down. “So long as it’s still something you want, I mean.”

“Oh, trust me, it is,” Patrick says vehemently, earning a little smile from David. “I really like it so far. Pushing you around a little, the rough sex, telling you what to do. And I know you said you want to be surprised. But, given what you just said, I think for anything more intense than what we’ve been doing, we should talk about it before we do it. Make plans.”

“Oh, you’re gonna like these plans,” Patrick says, low, and kisses him on the mouth, soft this time, teasing.

“Am I,” David says. “So how will I know what these plans are, or when they’re being executed?”

He tosses the question back to David. “Depends on what you want,” he says.

David sighs, frowning. “Thought I told you I’m not good at making choices like this.”

Patrick smiles at him, rueful. “Good time to start, maybe?”

Biting his lip, David nods to himself, looking suddenly determined, “I think . . . I think I want you to tell me. But like. Not too far in advance, or I’ll get weird about it. An hour?”

Pleased, Patrick nods. That way Patrick can ask him if he’s into it, and then they’ll have time to talk it out; it suits him just fine. “You got it.”

Just to be contrary, Patrick tries to make David do all the work in bed that night, lying back and enjoying it with his ankles on David’s shoulders, watching as David works his fingers into Patrick’s ass. It doesn’t last too long, though, because David’s fingers always get him way too excited, and he ends up flipping him over and riding him instead, the first time he’s tried it. He’s a little unsteady at first, but figures it out after a minute and a few corrective nudges from David. It’s good for the abs, actually, and it feels fantastic, the angle, the depth, the sense of taking and being taken at the same time.

“There you go. Back on top,” David laughs, when they hit the rhythm of it. “I’m surprised you lasted that long. The only way you can be a pillow queen is if I tie you up and make you.” He bucks up against him, fucking Patrick rough and slow and hard, the way he knows Patrick likes it.

“We gotta do that again soon, too,” Patrick grins, sliding himself slowly up and then down to meet David’s thrusts, rolling through their easy rhythm.

“There’s time for all of it,” David says, and his smile is beautiful, and uncomplicated, and unanxious. “Add it to the list.”

Patrick’s heart thuds in his chest.

*
Team Café Tropical wins their first game of the season, an away game against a pretty decent team from Elk Lake, and they all get way too excited about it. There’s cheering, lifting of various players on shoulders to various degrees of success, an attempted gatorade shower, and a lot of hugging and jumping up and down. They are, as a team, really fucking messy, and Patrick doesn’t even care.

“You know it’s just the beginning of the season,” the captain of the Elk Lake Credit Union team mutters, watching them, bemused.

“We used to be really shitty!” Melissa cries out, and the rest of the team takes it up as a chant, *We used to be really shitty! We used to be really shitty! We used to be really shitty!* until Jeff and Wondo are carrying Melissa on their shoulders in little circles.

“What can I tell you,” Patrick says, to the other captain, breathless and slightly sticky from the gatorade. “We used to be really shitty.”

The Elk Lake Credit Union team is eventually impressed by their high spirits and invites them out for drinks, which they all accept gladly, though Patrick stops after one and nudges Candice, who’s driving the other car, to do the same. Still, it’s long after dark before they get back to Schitt’s Creek, and the back of Patrick’s car is sticky with gatorade and possibly puke, and he’s happy, so happy, with his life.

He texts pictures of the game to everyone, to David and to Joon-ho and to his parents and to his cousin Neil, annoyed that he has to do it on different text chains. It does mean that David and Joon-ho start texting each other, though, first on that chain and then, presumably, on another one that Patrick’s not on, because all of a sudden David’s full of Joon-ho’s opinions on Met Gala looks and vice versa.

“Should I be worried, about you two talking to each other? Ganging up on me?” He and David are spending the evening together, but David’s spent a good part of it texting with Joon-ho.

“This from someone who actually gangs up on me all the time,” David says, fingers still moving on his phone keyboard. “Last week you and Stevie intentionally provoked me into recommending a lube to Jocelyn.”

“That was more of a service to Jocelyn than a plot against you,” Patrick says, reasonably. It had been really funny to watch, though.

“And then you and Alexis had that nefarious plan to make me go on a bike ride with you.”

“That was not a nefarious plan, we asked you! It seemed like a step down from the tree walk.” They did also, admittedly, tease David into actually getting on the bike, and they had, admittedly, strategized about it over text beforehand, but that hardly made them *nefarious*. And it was a fun bike ride. “The tree walk was your nefarious plan, by the way.”

“Fine,” David says. “But you’re also nefarious, you have to admit that.”

Patrick grins. “If you say so.”

“So I am only defending myself by talking to your friends.”

“So what else do you and Joon-ho talk about?” Patrick asks.

“You,” David returns, tartly. Patrick kind of deserves that.

“Fine,” he sighs. David types again for a little while.
“But, anyway,” he says, looking up from his phone, “talking to Joon-ho did help us both to realize something. I mentioned that I’ve known you for a year now and haven’t seen your birthday go by, and he said he hasn’t heard you mention it either, and so we are now speculating on whether you’re a space alien or like, some kind of elf creature . . . ?”

“My birthday’s in July,” Patrick says, embarrassed, because he knew it would come up eventually, but he’d been hoping it would be more . . . in July.

David puts his phone down entirely and stares at him. “We were dating last July,” he says.

“Yup.” Patrick gets up to get another beer from the fridge.

David, predictably, follows him. “We were dating last July, and you didn’t mention that it was your birthday to me? I would’ve taken you out for your birthday!”

“Actually, you did. We went to that crappy taco place in Elmdale.”

David blinks three times, and then when he starts talking, he speaks really slowly before gaining speed rapidly, like a verbal avalanche. “You’re telling me, that on your birthday, I said something like, hey Patrick, wanna go out for dinner, we can get crappy tacos, and you were like, sure thing, David, and went along with me to a taco joint run by white people and later got food poisoning—”

“Not my best birthday ever,” Patrick admits, taking a swig of the cold beer. “But, hey, in another way, it kind of was, because I spent it with a cute boy I was dating, and I’d never done that before.”

It was too hard, last year, to say it to David. It was too much to contemplate being treated special, David doing special sweet things just for him. Or worse, David doing things for him or getting him a present because he felt obligated. Patrick had wanted to tell him, had tried, but every time he found himself holding it back, and by the time they were at the taco place, it felt too late. He can see, now, how messed up that was.

David narrows his eyes.

“Is this part of your weird only child thing, like at your housewarming party, where people are just supposed to notice how you’re feeling without you saying it? Because you know that I grew up with Alexis and we had to shout to be heard over each other.”

“No, no. C’mere.” Patrick grabs him up and kisses him. “I was just being weird and shy last year. You can take me someplace better than that white people taco place this year.”

He’s getting used to it, now, the idea that David can take care of him. That he likes it when David takes care of him.

“Well, yeah,” David grumbles. “Not a high bar to clear.”

*  

Maybe it’s because of their conversation about Patrick ganging up on him with Stevie and Alexis for nefarious plots, but the very next time he and Alexis try to gang up on David with a nefarious plot, it ends up going suddenly and seriously sideways. Patrick thinks that he’s just teasing David about Ken, the guy who gave him his number, and Alexis provides backup with a few digs at David’s tender places, and it’s a pretty normal day at the store right up until David, for some reason, takes it seriously.

At first, he thinks that David is jealous, that he’s being ridiculous, bringing up the paper with the
phone number on it hours after Ken already left the store. He thought they were past those little moments of insecurity. He turns to David incredulously.

“What are you doing? I’m obviously not going to use it.”

“Why not?” David asks, throwing his face into an easy-going smile that is obviously not easy-going at all.

“Um, because I’m in a committed relationship.”

“I know that,” David says, cheerfully, then adds, “I think you should call him.”

This is not, at all, what Patrick expected him to say. “What?”

“Skin-tight clothes aside, do you find Ken attractive?”

Patrick crosses his arms over his chest. Ken had a cute smile, the kind that said he was shy but sweet, and he was small, smaller than Patrick, with his legs looking good in his tight jeans and his arms corded with lean muscle. Dark hair and eyes. Funny and quick. Kind of . . . femme. Patrick was surprised, when he gave him his number; he hadn’t known it was coming at all, hadn’t even known they were flirting. But called upon to answer the question, it’s a yes. “I mean, sure,” he says.

“Then I think you should call him!”

“David.”

“Consider it a selfish act on my part. You have only been with me.”

“And Rachel, and like a handful of other girls.” Patrick tries to lower his voice, because David’s is way too high and too loud, and there’s still a customer in the store.

“Okay, we’ve all been with a handful of other girls. But I’m the only guy.”

Patrick thought that they’d talked about this. That they’d figured it out. How long has David been dwelling on this idea, that Patrick still has some kind of gay oats to sow? He thinks back to the weekend when they first started having sex, to David insisting that there were other queer men in the world and that Patrick would inevitably break up with him. This doesn’t feel the same, but maybe it’s related.

David being the only guy doesn’t matter to Patrick, not at all, but it’s always mattered to David, at least a little.

“So?” he asks.

“So, inevitably, there might come a point where you find yourself curious about being with other people. So why not explore that now, so that we don’t have to have this conversation five years down the line.” David rubs his hands down Patrick’s arms, holding them, where Patrick still has them crossed. He seized on that last part; that last part was interesting.

“Oh, so you think we’re gonna be together five years from now?” Patrick asks, twisting his mouth away from a smile. It’s like the apartment thing again, the moving in together thing: David seems to take their future together for granted, these days, but Patrick still hasn’t learned to expect it. Maybe he needs to change his expectations.

David, of course, sidesteps the question entirely.
“I think a cute boy gave you his number, and you should go for dinner, and run free,” he says, hands moving loosely through a series of expressive, carefree gestures that Patrick thinks are lies. “Best case scenario, you realize how good you have it with me. Worst case scenario, you realize how good you have it with me.”

His touches to Patrick’s arms have gotten looser, too, just fingertips in the extra material of his sweater, light and easy to escape from. Patrick unfolds his arms to get the paper with the phone number, and David’s hands immediately jump off of him, back up into the air.

“Fun!” David says, which, if Patrick were listing exclamatory phrases likely to come out of David’s mouth, wouldn’t have been one of them.

Still, he pulls out his phone and calls Ken, right there in front of David, wondering if David will stop him at some point. Surely this joke has to stop, at some point. They can’t just keep playing monogamy chicken.

“Hi, Ken,” Patrick says, warmly. “It’s Patrick, we met earlier today.”

“Patrick!” Ken’s voice comes down the line. “Oh my gosh, I’m so happy you called me.”

“Well, I was happy you gave me your number,” Patrick replies, smiling so that it sounds like a smile in his voice, looking up at David while he does it. David, for his part, looks on like a proud mama bear, clasping his hands together and nodding.

There’s no way he’s actually feeling that casual about all of this. Patrick’s gonna call his bluff.

“So, did you want to get together sometime?” Ken asks.

“I’d like that. I was thinking about dinner tonight, in fact, if that’s not too soon.” The lines, the script, all feel familiar, and after a moment, Patrick realizes that this is exactly how he used to ask girls on dates, smiling and polite over the phone.

“I could do that,” Ken replies, cheerfully. “You know, there’s a new restaurant in Elm Valley, if you don’t mind a drive. It’s a tapas place.”

“What’s it called?” Patrick asks. Ken gives him the details.

“I’m excited to see you later, then,” Ken says.

“I’m really looking forward to it,” Patrick says, putting all the warmth he can into his voice, sure that this is the moment at which David will stop him.

David doesn’t. He says goodbye and hangs up, and David squeezes his shoulders and kisses him softly.

“There, was that so hard?” he asks.

Patrick shakes his head.

*

So, Patrick goes to dinner with Ken. Even though he’s been dating David for almost a year and has no particular desire to do so, it seems to be important to David that he try. It’s a bit of a drive to Elm Valley, and he ends up getting there first, so he waits around outside. It’s a warm night and there’s a little veranda with fairy lights strung through the wooden slats of the walls. Patrick sits on a picnic
bench and wonders what the fuck he’s doing.

Ken shows up in a groaning old boat of a Chrysler, not the car Patrick would’ve pictured for him. He stands as Ken locks it and walks over to him.

“Sweet ride,” he says, which makes Ken grin.

“It was my older brother’s, back when he was in university, and it wasn’t exactly brand new then. Still, it got me to this date, so I can’t be mad at it.” He turns his smile on Patrick, and whoa, this guy’s charming. Now that Patrick knows he’s flirting, he can see that he’s really charming.

Suddenly at a loss for what he’s supposed to do—smile back? Offer his arm? Kiss him? He’s only ever done gay dating once before and it was with his business partner—Patrick panics and bends down a little to kiss his cheek, the way David had for him, the morning after their first kiss. Ken returns it, and looks like maybe he’s charmed, too.

Okay. That wasn’t bad. Patrick can do this. He’s got this. He can be suave.

He gestures at the restaurant doors. “Shall we?”

Ken doesn’t eat red meat, so they split a bunch of fancy little fish and chicken and vegetable dishes, some of them traditional Spanish stuff, some more experimental. Tapas gives them plenty to talk about, at least, as they have to collaborate on the menu and the order, talk about their tastes in food, and then as the food comes out they can talk about what they like and don’t like. It’s a good choice for a date, Patrick thinks. He should bring David here.

He shouldn’t be thinking about David.

“So you said you’re an artist?” Patrick tries.

“That’s what I tell people. I’ve been working as a waiter, though, just for the brief period before my inevitable stardom and success.”

He’s sweet; he’s really sweet, and funny. Patrick likes him.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be any day now,” he says.

Patrick asks him more questions about that, what kind of art, where have you shown it, and wishes that David were here; he’s the one who knows stuff about art, who would have interesting opinions on it. He has to stop himself, again, from thinking so much about David.

“So, there’s something I should tell you,” Patrick says, eventually, because Ken is nice and Patrick doesn’t want to be a dick. “I’m seeing someone.”

“Was it the extremely passive-aggressive guy at the store?” Ken asks, grinning.

Patrick laughs. “How’d you know?”

“I didn’t, but I figured either you were seeing each other or he was into you, so.”

“He told me to call you.”

Ken nods, like this is normal, chewing on a piece of shrimp. “So, like, an open relationship.”

“Not . . . really. This is our first time trying it.”
“Oh. Huh.”

“I didn’t think it was fair to you, not to tell you.” He waits for Ken to get angry, or call off the date, at least. Then Patrick can tell David that he tried.

But Ken just shrugs. “I’ve been here before. It doesn’t mean you and I can’t have some fun together.”

He touches Patrick’s hand, a light teasing brush of his fingertips, there and gone. Patrick feels himself start to sweat.

“Yeah,” he says.

“You want the rest of this egg thing?” Ken asks.

“You go for it.”

He feels a lot more off-kilter for the rest of the meal, but he manages to laugh at the right times and say nice things, even as his stomach is gradually clenching around the very tasty food they’re eating.

He really expected Ken to leave when he mentioned David. The fact that he didn’t means—he likes Patrick a lot, maybe, or else . . . or else that he’s not interested in anything long-term.

Ken would maybe even have sex with him tonight, he thinks. Maybe Ken even wants that. He keeps touching Patrick’s hand, and Patrick keeps smiling at him because he doesn’t know what else to do, and it reminds him a little of how he used to feel on dates with women, trapped in a script he didn’t write, touching and being touched because it’s what he’s supposed to do.

Did David send him on this date intending for him to have sex with someone else? Surely not, right? Surely that requires a longer and more specific discussion. Patrick wishes they’d talked about it more, that he knew what was expected. Or allowed.

In another time and place, if he were single, he thinks he might’ve done it. Gone back to Ken’s place, fucked. He’s small, but looks deceptively strong, like he might be really energetic in bed. Patrick could see it being fun, between them. Different from what he’s used to with David. Patrick thinks he might’ve done it.

Or maybe not; maybe he wouldn’t have done it; he was never good at casual. He can’t tell. He was never this guy, wanting to date random men. He didn’t want to be this guy.

When he asks him, Ken pulls out his phone and shows him photos of some of his art. It’s actually really beautiful, and Patrick says so, with feeling, which makes Ken smile so genuinely that Patrick has to smile back the same way. He shuffles his chair a little closer, so that they can bend their heads over the phone screen together, and Patrick swipes through the pieces one by one. He wonders if David would like them, if they could be something for them to carry in the store. They don’t have enough art; David is always saying so.

Ken’s shoe brushes his leg, first lightly, and then a little more firmly; after a minute, Patrick gets that it’s intentional. He looks down, at the shoe where it’s pressed against his pantleg, long and pointy but also square for some reason, and he gets momentarily obsessed with it, with the weird shape of it that makes his foot look way bigger than it actually is.

He doesn’t want to be here with someone who wears those shoes. It’s weird and wrong for him to be here with someone who wears those shoes, because David would never wear those shoes, and he only wants to be here with David. He can’t—there’s no future he can imagine, where he goes on
dates with anyone but David.

The realization sets his brain spinning, and he keeps staring down at Ken’s shoes.

“Patrick?” Ken says, softly, after he’s been looking at their feet for what is probably way too long. He’s pulled back a little, is no longer touching him, is giving Patrick space. He really does seem to be a nice guy.

“I—can’t do this,” Patrick says, pushing his chair back suddenly, making a scraping noise so high-pitched it causes other diners around them to wince. “Sorry.”

“You. Oh,” Ken says, sounding a little disappointed.

He takes a second to think it through, then carefully pulls his chair back in slightly and gets out his wallet. He has cash, that’s really good; that means he doesn’t have to wait for the server to bring around the debit machine. He pulls out enough to cover the whole bill and the tip.

“I’m really sorry,” he says again, meeting Ken’s eyes. “I don’t think this was a good idea.”

“Open relationship’s not for everyone,” Ken says, amicably, even though he’s clearly a little bummed out. Patrick feels, suddenly, like paying the bill isn’t enough on its own. An idea strikes him. He puts his hand on top of Ken’s hand on the table.

“Hey,” he says, and Ken meets his eyes. “I had a nice time. And I like your paintings. If you want, you should come back to the store sometime and talk to my boyfriend. David. He used to be a gallerist in New York, so maybe he’d have good advice, or maybe . . . I don’t know. We could carry your work in the store. Depending on cost and stuff like that.”


Patrick smiles at him, then, and Ken smiles back. He thinks about it, about how the store could do more of this, support local queer artists specifically. Maybe they should have an event of some kind, just for that.

“But just so I’m clear I super do not want to date you,” Patrick adds, then winces at his own words. “Not that you’re not, uh, not that—you’re—”

“I get it,” Ken laughs. “I’ll come by the store sometime soon, so long as your boyfriend is cool with it.”

“Great,” Patrick says. “I’m really sorry, again.”

“Not my worst date this year,” Ken sighs. “It’s just, I’m new to the area, and it’s hard to meet people.”

Patrick cocks his head. “You know, there’s a queer shindig in Schitt’s Creek once a month. Lots of cute guys there. I could introduce you around.”

“Deal,” Ken says, and then Patrick finally, finally, gets out of there. The fresh, cool air outside the restaurant is a relief against his too-warm face. He can’t stop thinking about Ken’s shoes.

* 

The drive back to Schitt’s Creek takes forever, and by the time he gets there he’s so antsy that he doesn’t want to just text David or call him, he wants to see him in person, touch him, kiss him.
Which is why it’s weird when he finds himself pulling over on the side of the road before he even gets to the motel, finds himself turning off the car and leaning to rest his forehead against the steering wheel.

He doesn’t want to be with anyone else. Not in a right now way. Not in a let’s see where this thing with David goes way. He’s pretty sure he doesn’t want to be with anyone else. For the rest of his life.

It occurs to him that maybe, given some of the things he’s said, that maybe David’s already come to that same conclusion. Maybe that was why he pushed Patrick to go out with Ken in the first place, to give Patrick a chance to see if he feels the same way.

Patrick sits with that thought for a long time. He doesn’t know how long. Eventually, his phone beeps. He pulls it out of his pocket.

He expects it to be David, texting to ask how his date is going, but it’s not; there are no texts from David Rose, who Patrick wants to be with for the rest of his life. Jesus.

It’s a text from his dad: How’s it going, kid? Doing anything fun this weekend?

He texts back. His hands are shaking.

Nope, same old same old.

September, he thinks. If he wants what he thinks he wants with David, he’ll have to go visit his parents in September.

He tells David that he couldn’t go through with it, and the look of relief on David’s face at that confession is enough to tell Patrick that maybe he didn’t feel great about this little experiment either. That’s something, at least.

“I don’t wanna date Ken,” Patrick says, exasperated, when David lets him in.

“I don’t think I ever said date,” David demurs, which would’ve been helpful information to have up front.

“Was it the lack of ground rules?” Alexis asks, from the peanut gallery. Patrick turns to say hi to her, then back to David.

He tells him he loves him. He tells him he doesn’t want to meet up with other guys. And when David kisses him, softly, mouth open against his, Patrick wraps his arms around him, grateful. It feels good, like a coming back together, like the thing that’s been changing between them might be settling into place.

Maybe David is finally over his idea that he’s not enough for Patrick, or that Patrick’s going to get curious about dating other men sometime in the future.

Five years down the line, David said. Patrick’s thinking about that, now, about five years, ten, all the years.

He even tells David about the weird shoes, because it’s the kind of thing David will totally get, and because he wants to tell David everything. Because he wants to share his life with David.
For the next couple days, that knowledge takes up a lot of space in his brain, leaves him buzzing and inefficient at work, distracted with his friends and even with David.

He wonders if this is what it’s like to want to marry someone.

At next LGBTQ2AI-plus night, he watches the older couples, the ones who’ve been together for years and years. The shindig is at Ray’s, which still feels a lot like home to Patrick, after he lived here for so long, and there’s a warm, domestic vibe to the evening. Ray made a ton of amazing food, and most people are sprawled on the comfy living room couches or around Ray’s big, welcoming kitchen table: Denise and her husband, making each other laugh so hard she buries her head against his shoulder, snorting, shaking, joyful, while he holds on to her. Katherine and Maggie, holding court together amid a circle of younger lesbians, telling outrageous stories. Ronnie kissing the back of Karen’s hand, absently, something she’s done so many times over the years that it’s just ingrained physical habit, even to someone as gruff as Ronnie.

He’s never seen himself in those kinds of relationships before, the forever kind. He’s never been able to picture himself that way. When he thinks back on how he felt when he was engaged to Rachel—like the future was a blank after a certain point, like the film of his life would run out after their wedding—it’s astonishing how different he feels now. He can imagine a future with David. He can imagine getting older together.

While he’s gazing around softly, though, Ronnie catches sight of him, and comes over with her hands on her hips.

“Rookie,” she says, dangerously. Patrick shakes himself out of it. Word’s obviously gotten back to Ronnie about their secret practices and increasing string of baseball wins.

“Gonna have to call me something else now,” Patrick points out, grinning. “Captain would be fine.”


He holds up his hands. “Gwen came to us.”

“And you had no problem taking her on, when you knew she was one of my star players.”

“She hasn’t played for you since last May!”

Ronnie waves this away. “Don’t give me that. You knew! Where’s your loyalty?”

“My loyalty’s to my team,” Patrick says.

“I can’t believe—I was your team! I gave you that team!”

“I mean. Jeff kind of did? But they’re a good team, Ronnie, it’s gonna be a good rivalry. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Hmm. I wanted some competition. I didn’t want you and Gwen both on the competing team. It fucks up my roster.”

Patrick feels himself smiling. “Aw, you wanted me to come back?”

“And, more importantly, Gwen,” Ronnie says, pointedly.

“Well, you’re gonna have to live with it,” Patrick says. “Sorry, Ronnie, but you’ll be seeing us across the field from now on.”
Ronnie narrows her eyes at him and nods. “All right, all right. I see what you’re doing. But I hope you’re ready for the real competition, because I’m not gonna coddle you anymore.”

“Bring it on,” Patrick says. He offers his hand. Ronnie shakes it, firmly, and a few people around clap and cheer.

“Your relationship is weird,” Joon-ho tells him, after he and Ronnie decamp to different corners of the party. “Like. Are you friends? Do you hate each other? Is she your mentor? Is it an Obi-Wan and Anakin situation?”

“I don’t know either,” Patrick says, but he’s smiling.

“Sports people are weird,” Joon-ho sighs.

“You wouldn’t feel that way if you joined a team,” Patrick suggests. Joon-ho snorts.

“No,” he says, shortly, because they’ve had this conversation before.

The door opens on the other side of the room, and Patrick glances up to see who it is; as it turns out, it’s Ken. Patrick gives him a rueful smile and a wave. Ken waves back, but keeps his distance, which is nice of him. Patrick will be sure to tell David about him being here later.

“Wait, who’s that guy? You know him?”

“That’s Ken, I told you about him. David made me go on a date with him.”

“Ohhh, disaster date Ken.”

“Let’s maybe not call him that,” Patrick says. “I was thinking about setting him up with Ben.”

“You’re gonna set up two guys with rhyming names?”

“Love can be found anywhere,” Patrick says, loftily.

“I guess they would have cute couple name possibilities, though,” Joon-ho muses. “Benneth. Kenjamin. Cara DiGirolamo wrote a paper on blend names, it was really interesting.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Joon-ho sighs. “David will get it. Well, not the linguistics part. But the couple name part.”

Patrick shakes his head.

“Will you introduce us?” Joon-ho asks. Patrick raises an eyebrow at him, and Joon-ho rolls his eyes in exasperation. “Not like, introduce us, introduce us, I just wanna meet the new gay Asian guy in town.”


He subsequently leaves Joon-ho in charge of introducing Ken to Ben, and heads to the kitchen for something else to drink. While he’s getting a beer, he runs into Derrick, who’s drinking something very blue in a very tall glass and looks a little tipsy.

“Patrick!” he smiles. “Having fun?”

“I am,” Patrick says, taking a drink. “I guess school’s out for summer?”
Derrick sighs. “Not yet, not yet. Soon, though. Soon I will be free of driving to three different towns every week to teach tap to snot-nosed kids.”

Patrick winces. “Sounds like you’re gonna need some time to recover from that once the semester is over.”

“It’d be nice,” Derrick says. “I do like it, though, I shouldn’t be so mean. The kids are fun. I just wish there were more solid jobs so I didn’t have to take on so many high school gigs, in addition to adjuncting at Elmdale.”

“Ouch,” Patrick says. “Y’know, this is making me feel really bad, because I actually had something I wanted to ask you, but now I kind of think it’d be adding to the pile.”

“Okay, you’ve got me curious, now, so I have no choice but to tell you to ask me whatever it is.” Derrick rolls his eyes. Patrick grins.

“Well, if you’re gonna twist my arm,” he says. “I was wondering about resources for kids at the high school here. Like, LGBTQ2AI-plus type kids. You work there, so I thought you might know.”

Sipping his drink, Derrick nods. “Yeah, plus there are a lot of queer kids in dance and theatre. No, there’s really nothing at SCHS. Nothing official, anyway. The kids hang out in groups, sometimes. You can sort of tell. Little fierce clusters of them giving each other undercuts and stick-and-poke tattoos.”

“So, what I was going to ask was, do you want to make something official? At the school?”

“Ah, there it is.”

“There it is,” Patrick agrees.

Derrick nods, slowly, frowning. “What’s it called? How do you get kids to come to it? How do you get kids who don’t want to be outed at school to come to it? Where’s it held?”

“Um,” Patrick says. “I was—kind of hoping someone other than me would know those answers. I have no idea how this kind of thing works.”

“It’s not like it’s not a good idea,” Derrick says. “I’ve seen those kinds of groups at other schools, and they do good. It would just be a lot of work to get it through. Funding, PTA approval, stuff like that. Especially if you want to do it through the school. And I don’t have any sway there, I’m not even full time.”

“Right,” Patrick says. He should’ve thought through the logistics more; normally, he would’ve. He just—wanted something in place, for this one kid, to give him some place he could go. People to talk to, other than Patrick. “I guess I got ahead of myself.”

“It’s a good long term goal. You attend enough meetings, make enough friends, you could make it happen in a couple years.” Derrick looks at Patrick shrewdly. “Do you know a kid in particular?”

“I think so, yeah,” Patrick sighs. “He’ll have graduated by then.”

Derrick shrugs. “Then stop looking for other people to do it, and give that kid support. That’s what I do, when they come to me. Or, you know, build things where you are, with the resources you’ve actually got.”

“Huh,” Patrick says.
“It’s a thing, being out and gay in rural communities. Sometimes the kids just—latch on to you, because you’re the only queer person they know. It can be kind of weird. And you have to figure it out as you go.”

“I thought, y’know. I’m not a counselor, or whatever. I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Yeah, neither am I,” Derrick grimaces. “No one ever prepared me for it. The first time a kid came out to me, I literally wanted to scream and run away.” He makes a fluid little snap-zoom roadrunner motion with his free hand. “For their own good.”

Patrick smiles. “But I’m guessing you didn’t.”

“Oh, I got through it. No idea if I did it right. I got better over time, though.”

“Damn,” Patrick sighs.

Derrick pats him on the shoulder. “Congratulations, you’re a pillar of the local gay community now. You don’t get to hand this off.”

“Is it—are there, like. Books I can read? Steps to take?”

Derrick shrugs. “Probably. Look. It’s not that complicated. You’re not a counselor, so don’t try to be one. Just give this kid whatever support it makes sense for you to give. Listen and be open. Give them space.”

Patrick nods. “That’s smart.”

“It is not my first time at this particular rodeo,” Derrick confides. “I wasn’t kidding, before. I’ve heard more teary teenage coming out speeches than I can count.”

That’s . . . only a little terrifying.

“I guess I’ll look forward to that, then,” he says.

“Think of it as your summer project,” Derrick says, with a wave of his hand holding his tall blue drink. Patrick glances down at his beer and kind of feels like he needs a tall blue drink, at this point. He wonders where the tall blue drinks are. Maybe Ray has his blender out.

“So. You have anything going on for the summer?” he asks, to change the topic. “Or just, recovering from shepherding queer youth?”

“Oh, there are tons of theatre productions throughout the summer. Lots of musicals. I’ve auditioned for a bunch, and we’ll see what I get.”

“Huh,” Patrick says. “I like musicals. I didn’t know there were ones around here to go see.”


Patrick grins. He was in *The Wizard of Oz* in university, and he really liked it. Or, most of it. “I’m not a dancer, though,” he says.

Derrick waves his hand. “Most people in these shows aren’t. I think there’s even a community production in Schitt’s Creek this year. *Cabaret.* Probably won’t be that competitive.”

Patrick remembers liking the movie version of *Cabaret*. He’s never seen it live, though. “Are you auditioning for that one?”
Smiling, Derrick shakes his head. “No offense to the Schitt’s Creek Theatre and Variety folks, but I have my sights set a little higher,” he says. “I’m hoping I get one of the touring productions that goes throughout Ontario. Get on the road. See some big cities.”

“Won’t you miss Steven?”

“Thought maybe I’d invite him along,” Derrick says, smiling softly. Patrick feels a rush of gladness for him, for both of them.

“That sounds amazing. Well. Good luck.”

Derrick sighs and shakes his head. “It’s break a leg, Patrick. You’d better get it right if you’re going to be a local theatre star.”

Patrick laughs. “Break a leg. And I’ll think about it.”

*  

At the café the following Monday, Twyla is singing as she delivers french toast, as she clears away plates, as she brings Patrick his tea.

“Got a song stuck in your head?” Patrick asks.

“Preparing for my audition for the musical,” she says. “I’m trying out for one of the Kit Kat Klub dancers.”

“Not for the lead?” Patrick asks, piling some of his scrambled eggs onto his toast.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t,” Twyla says. “But it’s fun to be involved.”

“I was—someone told me I should try out,” Patrick says. Then, for cred, he adds, “Derrick told me.”

“Well, you can sing, you should,” Twyla agrees.

“You can sing, too,” Patrick points out, because she’s become one of the stars of the Rose Apothecary open mic nights. “You should have more confidence.”

“That’s really nice of you to say. I don’t know, it’s a lot just to work up the courage to audition. It’s different than the Jazzagals or singing at your store. It’ll be a lot of people.”

“Yeah,” Patrick agrees.

“So, are you going to go?”

Patrick fiddles with his fork for a second. “I don’t know. I haven’t done that kind of thing in a long time.”

“Wanna go together?” Twyla offers. “I could use some moral support, too.”

“All right,” Patrick agrees, warming to the idea. “Let’s do it.”

*  

He didn’t prepare for the audition thinking that Mrs Rose would be watching and judging him, but he guesses it’s his own fault for telling her about the production. It’s not—not terrible, though, because watching Mrs Rose in her element, giving occasionally nonsensical and occasionally
profound notes to the actors, is at least a little fun. When it’s his turn to audition, she tells him his character has never derived true pleasure from being with women, giving him a look that encourages him to play along in the joke. He nods, deadpan.

“I think I can wrap my head around that,” he says, breezily, which earns him a wink and a pursed-lips smile from Mrs Rose.

“Okay,” she says, knowingly, and it’s kind of nice, albeit weird, to joke about his sexual history with his boyfriend’s mother. Nothing any of the Roses do is precisely normal, but Patrick’s pretty sure that she sees this back-and-forth between them as a way emphasizing how they’re connected, how he’s a little bit like family. He likes it.

He throws himself into the acting, and to his surprise, Mrs Rose gets up from behind the table to direct him. Following what she says, he finds himself getting more into the role: I’ve never felt this way, about anyone, it says on the page, and delivering that line he feels real, feels genuine, even if he’s saying it to Jocelyn.

Mrs Rose calls it a breakthrough, and it feels like one.

“Patrick! Thank you. Or should I say thank you to our new Emcee!”

It’s been a while since Patrick’s seen the movie, but he remembers Joel Grey in a top hat. That sounds all right. It’s also the top-billed male role, so he guesses it’s a promotion. When Mrs Rose calls him their biggest talent, he smiles, pleased.

Then Mrs Rose raises her ringed fingers to her red lips and presses a kiss to them before blowing that kiss out to Patrick. The expression on her face is deeply fond, deeply impressed. Warm. It makes him feel amazing, invincible, perfect: David’s mom thinks he’s a good actor. There was a time when she refused to remember his name, and now she’s looking at him like someone she can be proud of.

It’s heady, dizzying. Patrick kisses his fingers and blows the kiss back at her, grinning helplessly at everyone in the room while he says thank you, and fumbles his way out the door.

That elation lasts him until the Town Hall front steps, when he starts thinking about the role he’s been cast in. There is a lot of dancing for the Emcee, isn’t there? And a lot of . . . he’s not sure. He’ll have to read the whole script. But. A lot of something, for sure.

* 

The kid, Gabe, comes back into the store, and before Patrick can even tell him to leave his backpack, he pulls out his wallet and slaps a fresh red fifty down on the counter.

“That’s not how much you owe,” Patrick says, covering for his initial surprise.

“Installments, bro,” Gabe says, sounding wounded.

“All right.” Patrick picks it up, thinks about what the right move is. Derrick said use the resources you have, and Patrick figures that right now, this repayment thing is what Gabe’s using as an excuse to keep coming in. Patrick can help him with that excuse. “Gimme a second and I’ll calculate your remaining debt.”

“Oh, come on. I’m trying here!”

Patrick tries hard not to smirk. “Where’d you get the money? Bank heist? Armoured car robbery?”
“I got a job.”

“Good for you. And your mom, did she like the birthday present?”

Patrick glances up from his laptop, where he’s running the numbers on their inventory losses from last summer and applying finance charges. The kid looks surprised.

“Yeah. She really liked it. Said she was gonna come by for more of the bath things.”

“Good.” Patrick types a little more, then reads off the number on the screen, rounding down the cents. “Three hundred and thirty-seven dollars,” he says. “Conservative estimate.”

“Shut up, that is so much!”

“I’ll take off your fifty, which leaves you at two eighty seven. Though you should be aware that it’s still accruing interest.”

“Interest,” Gabe says, in a flat tone of voice. “And, okay, so tell me, when I pay this all off, bearing in mind that I didn’t steal all of it and also that you have no proof I stole any of it—”

“Bearing that in mind, yes,” Patrick says.

“What do I get?”

“First of all, you get three hundred and thirty-seven dollars worth of toner, face cream, and exfoliator, legally purchased.”

“Ugh.”

“And a sense of satisfaction,” Patrick adds. “You’re right that I don’t have any proof, and we didn’t go to the cops at the time. You know why?”

“Yeah, cuz you’re nice, I get it.”

Patrick gives him a look. “Because it wasn’t worth the hassle. Shoplifting is hard to get reimbursed for via insurance claims, it’s almost always a waste of employee time. So there’s no use filing a police report.” He stops, tries to think his way through this conversation. “Though, you know, most shopowners around here would just call your parents. I still could.”

At this, the kid’s eyes come up to meet Patrick’s gaze. “I don’t care,” he says.

“No? All right.” Patrick goes back to his laptop, running a couple of reports that he doesn’t actually need right now.

“And you wouldn’t. I’m paying you back. It’s not even fair that I have to pay for everyone.”

“Sounds rough,” Patrick agrees, not looking up.

There’s a long pause, and then Gabe says, “Look. Don’t call my parents.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, closing the laptop and turning back to him. “Tell you what. I’ll make you a deal. If you promise never to steal from us again, I promise to never call your parents, for any reason.” He looks Gabe in the eye, gathering up his courage. “I’ll never tell them anything you don’t want me to.”

Gabe blinks, then frowns. Patrick’s not sure if he was clear. “And I have to pay you back.”
“Nope,” Patrick says. “So long as you don’t steal anymore, I won’t call them. You’re paying me back just because you’re a good person.”

Gabe looks at him for a long minute. “You’re really weird.”

“Uh-huh.” Patrick smiles, crossing his arms.

“What was that stuff we stole, anyway? You said, toner? Kevin’s sister paid us to get it, said she could sell it to the high school girls.”

Taking a deep breath so that it comes out sounding casual, Patrick says, “You’d have to ask my boyfriend about that. He’s better with that stuff than I am.”

“So you don’t—use? All this?”

Patrick shrugs. He thinks he knows what that question’s about, but he’s never really answered that one for himself, so. He just tells the truth. “Some of it, sometimes. The sunscreen’s really good, I wear it to baseball practice.”

“Huh,” Gabe says.

*  

For David’s birthday, for their anniversary, Patrick arranges for Stevie to cover the store and takes David to the fancy spa-slash-bed-and-breakfast that Joon-ho and Ray went to over Christmas.

“I thought we could treat ourselves,” Patrick said, when he told David about it, smiling hesitantly.

“What a lovely thought for you to have,” David agreed, delighted. There was something knowing and proud in his eyes, something Patrick didn’t have words for yet. He blushed when David kissed him, then, like it was their first time, like it was something new.

They get manicures, and facial treatments, and massages, and Patrick gives into it, that feeling of being spoiled, and he feels more relaxed than he has in a long time. He lets other people make his body soft and pliable and touchable.

David tells him all about different treatments he’s had, seaweed wraps and mud baths and little fishes eating the skin off his feet.

“There was one where they hit you with reeds,” David says, giving Patrick a sly look across the private hot tub in their room.

“Was there,” Patrick asks, archly. “Did you like that?”

“Oh, well, it was very beneficial to the skin.”

“Uh-huh.” He half-walks and half-swims over closer to David, getting his hands on David’s chest. They’re both naked, and when Patrick runs his hands further down, David’s getting hard and thick under the water. “I’ve been thinking about what else we should do tonight.”

“Yes? Were reeds involved?”

“They could be.”

“I don’t actually like the reeds that way,” David demurs, smiling. “I only appreciated them in their professional capacity.” Patrick kisses him, coming closer to sit on his thighs.
“Good to know,” Patrick murmurs. “I appreciate you in more than a professional capacity.”

“Mmm, I noticed. You feel very appreciative right now.” Patrick slides up and down David’s thighs. “I did have some thoughts about anniversary sex, though,” David adds. “Reed-free thoughts.”

“Yes? And?”

“And I thought, wouldn’t it be nice to tie Patrick up and use that vibrator he likes on his prostate till he can’t stand it anymore? I thought, maybe it would be nice to see how many times I can make him come all over himself before he gets overwhelmed and begs to be let out.”

Patrick blinks. David’s hand comes up to wrap around Patrick’s dick, which is getting really hard really fast.

“I’m gathering that you like the idea,” David says.

“I, yeah, I like it,” Patrick breathes. “Let’s pencil that in for sure.” David strokes him slowly, and Patrick arches into it, groaning. “Though I also had my own thoughts about anniversary sex.”

“I’m open to suggestions,” David smiles. “Among other things.”

Patrick huffs a laugh. David’s hand squeezes him tight, his thumb rubbing over the head of his cock. “Well. I thought. Since it’s also your birthday. You could order whatever you want from room service, and I could feed it to you.” He looks David in the eye. “Feed you every bite, nice and slow, from my fingers. Watch your beautiful mouth. Maybe give you a handjob at the same time. Would you be open to that, baby?”

“God, Patrick. Yes.” David’s free hand comes up out of the water and wraps around Patrick’s neck, pulling him in for a wet kiss. Patrick slides his hands up and down David’s sides, thumbing over his nipples, both of them making low, desiring noises.

“Sounds like an ambitious itinerary,” Patrick says, when he pulls away. “But I think we can manage it.”

They do.

The next day, driving back home, Patrick thinks about what it means, a year, that they’re a year in and everything about it just keeps getting better. Just keeps growing. He can’t wait to see who they are together a year from now.

*

The joy of it is, Patrick gets to find that out, day by day.

In bed with David, in the bed they’re getting used to sharing, Patrick keeps on practicing what David calls his little dom moments. They practice together. They talk it through.

“So, how hard can I pull your hair?” he asks, softly, while David’s giving him a blowjob. “How hard do you want it, really?” David tells him, tells him more more more, until Patrick’s hand is gripped in it much harder than he would’ve ever dared before, and David’s eyes are closed tight and watering, and David’s fingers are digging into his thighs as he goes back down on him.

* 

“Will you get yourself off for me, while I watch?” He kisses David’s shoulder. It’s an old fantasy,
one that Patrick doesn’t want to wait for anymore. “Will you let me look at you?”

“Yes,” David says, “yeah,” and they do that, and Patrick’s quiet for it, quiet for most of it, still wearing his clothes, lying on his side next to David while he puts his fingers in his ass and strokes his cock.

As David gets closer to coming, Patrick breaks into the silence and says, “God, you look so good. I could watch you do this forever. I love that you’re doing this for me.”

David closes his eyes, and groans, and it gives Patrick an idea.

“Do you think you can come for me, David? Come when I tell you?”

“Yeah,” David grunts out, “yeah, Patrick, I can—if you tell me, yes, I want that. Please.”

“That’s good,” Patrick says. “That’s so good. Come for me now, baby. Fuck your fist and come all over yourself so I can watch you.”

David cries out, and arches up, and comes. He comes because of Patrick’s voice, because Patrick wanted him to, because Patrick told him to. It doesn’t take long for Patrick to get off, after that.

*I*

“I want you to push me down,” David says, one day, softly, so Patrick gets his hands on David’s shoulders and, wonderingly, does it: shoves David roughly down to his knees in the kitchen, until David’s looking up and he’s looking down and their breath catches together.

“This is when you could make me,” David adds, “grab my head and fuck my face.” But Patrick doesn’t, just opens his jeans to let David suck him eagerly into his mouth. He comes fast, so fast, just from the idea of it. Making him.

*I*

“Fuck me harder,” Patrick demands, when they’re in the middle of it, “I know you can do it, do me harder, come on, David, faster, that’s good, that’s good, just like that, God, God, fuck, you’re doing me so good—”

And David buries his head against Patrick’s chest, eyes closed, lost, and after they come, Patrick strokes his hair.

It’s good practice. It helps him map out the things he wants, the things David wants, the way this works between them. They’re being careful, and that’s good, Patrick thinks: that’s how he needs it to be, to make sure he does it right.

*I*

Mrs Rose asks him to come in to later rounds of auditions, to act as a sounding board for some of the Sallies they’re auditioning. Since the guy playing Cliff doesn’t have a very flexible schedule, Patrick plays both Cliff and the Emcee. Most of the candidates are pretty bad, but Patrick does his best to give them something to work with. It’s mostly a few dialogue scenes and some singing, so he thinks he does all right.

“So, Patrick, I suppose we will be working together over the coming weeks,” Mrs Rose says, after one of the auditions. “What a splendid opportunity to get to know each other a little better.”
“That sounds nice, Mrs Rose,” Patrick says, even though it sounds more like a fifty-fifty split between nice and terrifying. She’s remained quietly supportive of his and David’s relationship, over the last months since the news about Rachel dropped, but more in the way where she nods regally at him when they cross paths, or smiles at him when he tries to gently stop her from brazenly shoplifting. David said that these were good signs, so Patrick left it at that. But he does like her, likes how she throws herself into things and takes risks and refuses to ever stop dressing like she’s heading up a red carpet. Like David, you can’t miss her in a crowded room.

Now, as Patrick stacks the chairs in the rehearsal space and Mrs Rose watches him from her perch near the wall, he wonders what would drive her to take part in this little community production. Maybe the same thing that drove him: the desire to flex, to do something new, to shake off cobwebs.

“I certainly did not realize, before we embarked on this remarkable journey into Cabaret, that you were in fact a double threat! An actor and a singer!”

“I’ll never be a triple, like you,” Patrick says, and she narrows her eyes at him, like she knows he’s being intentionally flattering but also likes it.

“We will create for you some beautiful choreography. You won’t be able to help but succeed.”

“I hope so.” He’s pretty worried about it, the dancing.

There’s a little pause, Mrs Rose continuing to watch while he stacks the chairs, then folds the table and slides it towards the wall.

“And how does David feel about your attempts to tread the boards?”

Patrick looks up at her, smiling. “He thinks it’s cute.”

“I would wager that he does,” Mrs Rose says, softly. “He is very smitten with you, you know.”

Looking at her, he can’t tell what the emotional nuance of that sentence is: whether she’s teasing him, or inviting him to talk sincerely about David with her, or, or asking his intentions towards her son, like Alexis did months ago. She’s hard to read, sometimes, much harder than anyone else in her family.

“I know,” he says, eventually, going with the simple truth in response. “I’m . . . I’m smitten too.”

“How delightful,” she coos. “Having love in your life will make you a better actor.”

“Yeah? The Emcee isn’t in love.”

She tsks at him like a kindergarten teacher. “Patrick. Of course he is. He is in love with the audience.”

He huffs out a laugh. “Then I guess I’ll have to make sure David’s in the audience for every show.”

To his surprise, Mrs Rose laughs softly at this. “Do you know, I once did the same. Had John sit in the front row for every performance of my off-Stratford production of Much Ado About Nothing. I told him, no Benedict could infuriate me, nor drive me to wilder heights of passion, than he.”

Patrick suppresses a grin, thinking of what David would say if his mother uttered the words wilder heights of passion in front of him. Patrick thinks it’s kind of funny.

“I’ll learn that trick from you, then,” he says, and Mrs Rose nods at him. She and Mr Rose have been
together a long time, and they’re still, from every indication, deeply in love. Patrick wonders if David will still be in the audience for Patrick, at open mic nights and community theatre productions and whatever else, for years to come. Five years, ten years, thirty years. If he’ll be there so Patrick can rely on him, the way that Mrs Rose relied on her husband, solid and dependable in the front row.

Patrick wants that. He wants to ask David for that.

He finishes stacking the chairs and tables; the rehearsal space is completely in order. They just have to turn out the lights for the evening.

“Can I walk you out?” he asks.

That calculating look again. Then, coming over to him, she flaps her hand languidly, and he doesn’t know what she’s intending until she takes his arm and starts walking with him towards the door.

Patrick’s not sure, but he thinks he’s only seen her do this with Mr Rose, and occasionally with David. Her hand is light against his elbow, barely-there pressure, but it’s enough for him to feel it, the fleeting warmth of her skin. Her rings catch and slide against the fabric of his shirt.

“Very gentlemanly, sweet Patrick,” she says, as if it had been his idea to escort her this way.

“I try my best,” he says, at a loss for any other way to respond.

“You do, don’t you.” She nods to herself, and they walk together out through the main room of town hall. “I like that.”

* 

His mom calls the store, and Patrick’s the one who answers this time.

“Hi, honey,” she says. “I was wondering, could I speak to David?”

It takes Patrick long beat to process what she’s asking. “You want to—what?”

“Speak to David, sweetheart. I want to ask him some things about that foot scrub. And get him to send more body milk.”

“You know I can send you body milk, right? I also work here.”

“Yes, but David knows which one I like, and your father already recycled the old bottle.”

“Okay,” Patrick says. He pulls the phone away from his ear, then puts it back, then says, “okay,” again. “Just a second.”

He holds out the phone to David, who’s spritzing the vegetables. “My mom wants to talk to you.”

David’s face lights up, and Patrick feels a helpless little surge of affection for both of them. They like each other. It’s good; it’s a good thing. It’ll make it easier when he comes out to his parents, at the end of the summer.

“Hi, Mrs Brewer,” David says, softly, taking the phone. “How’s the newest foster cat?”

They talk for a while, and not just about skincare. It’s not their first time doing it, but it is the first time it’s happened intentionally, his mom calling explicitly to speak to David and not to him.

Patrick almost wishes that David would say something, on one of these phone calls, something that
would make it clear that Patrick is gay, or that they’re dating, or that they’re in love. He wants it,
perversely, because then he wouldn’t have to do it, and then it would be over with.

He knows it’s a sick thing to wish for.

But the thing is, David’s so polite, and so careful, whenever he talks to them, that Patrick’s starting to
realize that there’s not much chance of it happening. David asks about their interests, rather than
talking about his own, listens to their opinions rather than stating his, and talks about the store rather
than his relationship with their son.

His voice is so soft, on those calls, so soft. Patrick needs to fix it. But he’s glad that they talk, that
they’re getting to know each other. Patrick loves them all. They should know each other.

It’s enough, for now, he tells himself. He’s going to fix it, but for now, it’s going fine. And when he
fixes it, his parents will already know David, and like him, and see how good he is for Patrick. This
way, they’ll see.

“I know, I was wondering that too!” David says, excitedly, into the phone. “I think it comes out in
August.”

They could be talking about skincare, or fashion, or movies, or books: Patrick doesn’t know. It’s just
between David and his mom.

“You mom says we should send along some stuff for your Great Aunt Elsie,” David says, after he
hangs up. “And asked if we have anything that your Uncle Doug might like.”

“Sure,” Patrick says.

Patrick thinks about how he’ll see his Great Aunt Elsie and his Uncle Doug when he goes back
home in September. How he’ll have to tell them, too.

*

Café Tropical keeps on winning. Whenever Patrick sees Ronnie, at games night, at Town Hall, at a
Jazzagals performance where he and David are supporting David’s mom, when she comes into the
store to buy bath stuff, the tension ratchets up between them. It’s mostly trash talk like they’ve
always had, but since the Gwen thing got around town, there’s an extra edge to it.

Patrick and David hire her to redo the bathroom at the store anyway, because she’s highly
recommended by everyone and she’s still Patrick’s friend. The job looks like it might drag on for
longer than it should, though, and Patrick finds himself getting his back up about it. From the
moment Ronnie tells them the project is delayed, there’s an itch of anger under his skin, distracting
him, annoying him.

“You know my uncle’s a contractor?” he tells David. “I know how this works. You gotta stay on top
of it, or they will find a million reasons to just drag it out.”

His Uncle Doug is the kind of guy who drinks too much, and laughs too hard at the worst kinds of
jokes, and thinks eating vegetables makes you feminine. Patrick’s suddenly thinking about him a lot,
with the green tape all around the store and the plastic tarps and the smell of fresh paint, remembering
summers as a kid when he and Neil and Tyler would go work with him for extra money. Patrick
never really liked being around him, which was why he put in applications at every restaurant and
retail store in town the spring before he turned fifteen. That summer, he got a job of his own, and
went to work at Rose Video instead.
Uncle Doug teased him, that year, about being too soft for manual labour. But at least Patrick didn’t have to see him as often.

David says something back about not talking to people, especially when they’re eating, and then goes off to the bathroom.

But Patrick isn’t soft, isn’t a pushover, and he can hold his own; no one’s going to take him for a ride. He goes over to confront Ronnie about it.

She shoots him down immediately, completely unflustered, and Patrick realizes quickly that he had no leg to stand on. She’s getting the tiles from Roland’s cousin. Of course she is; Ronnie has a social network for everything.

“I could always cancel the order, if that’s how you wanna do business,” she tells him, blinking up at him calmly. Patrick fidgets.

“Hi,” David says, coming back out of the bathroom. “Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know, you tell me,” Ronnie says, not taking her gaze off of Patrick. He feels like an asshole, but he feels angry, too, like he still wants to yell. But there’s nothing he can do except back down.

“Yeah, no, I was just telling Ronnie what a, what a great job she’s doing on the bathroom, and, uh, we should get back to the store.”

Ronnie nods at him: that’s right. They make a hasty exit, and David rubs Patrick’s arm quickly as they walk back across the street.

“You seem flustered,” he says.

When Patrick looks up at him, he’s frowning, like maybe he’s noticed that Patrick is really, disproportionately, flustered. “I’m just—I just want things to be done properly, David,” Patrick says.

“Okay,” David says slowly. “What did she say? Can she not get the tiles in time? Will we have to cancel the calligraphy workshop tomorrow?”

“No, she’s getting the tiles from Roland’s cousin. Probably.” They walk back in the store. It’s still all plastic and green tape. Paint smell. Patrick makes himself take a deep breath.

“All right. So. That’s good, right? I guess I’m wondering why you’re so upset?” David looks at him tentatively, like maybe he’s still not sure if he’s allowed to ask that. Patrick feels his shoulders relax, and in that moment, realizes how tense he’s been all day.

“I—I don’t know,” he says, honestly. He tries to think it through. It’d been that idea, that idea of being a pushover. Of being taken advantage of. Of being the butt of the joke. It still makes him angry, thinking how Roland had laughed at him.

“It’s not the end of the world if we have to cancel the workshop.”

“I told you we won’t,” Patrick says, annoyance creeping back into his voice. He takes a breath, lets it out. “Sorry. I mean, I think it’ll be okay. Ronnie did say she could cancel the order if I was gonna—well. She implied she could cancel it if I was gonna be a dick about it.”

“Okay, so what you’re telling me now,” David says, voice rising, “is that you confronted Ronnie
about the tiles and made the situation worse.”

“Maybe, David, I don’t know. I don’t think she’s actually going to cancel the order.”

“Well we are going to make sure she doesn’t!” David immediately goes into problem-solving mode, assembling a gift basket and talking about how they can probably catch Ronnie at home.

Patrick helps, numbly, because David’s right; it’s the right business decision. He puts stuff in the basket, all the stuff Ronnie usually buys when she comes in, when she supports their business. But he’s still angry, and he still feels like he was right to accuse her of dragging out the job, even though he was wrong about it. He feels . . . defensive, in a way he hasn’t for a while. He can’t put his finger on it.

“You know where Ronnie’s house is?”

Patrick does. It was one of the first houses he was invited to, when he got to town. It was the place where, just by walking in the door, he told this community he was queer for the first time.

They find Ronnie in the driveway, and give her the basket, and she tells them that she’s on her way now to run the tiles over and finish the job. She doesn’t seem angry, or offended, or upset; she’s just like she usually is, calm, a little ironic, like everything slides off of her.

Patrick doesn’t understand how she can be like that.

“So, since Ronnie’s going to be working in there all day, I say we just close the store and head back to my place,” Patrick suggests.

“Sounds good,” David agrees.

“And we can go back later and clean stuff up and open tomorrow.”

David nods. As they turn to walk back to Main Street, he crosses his arms. “So, I don’t want you to think that I don’t love it when you’re proactive, honey,” he says, “but it seems to me that this is a situation where us doing literally nothing would’ve made for a much better result.”


Patrick struggles to find a way to say what he’s feeling. He’s not sure what he’s feeling.

After a minute, David speaks again. “Is it about your, um. Your uncle?”

Patrick looks up at him, startled. “No,” he says, immediately. Then he thinks about it. “Maybe.”

When he comes out to his parents, he’ll have to come out to everyone. He can’t ask them to keep it a secret, like Rachel did, not if he wants them to think that he’s comfortable and happy and secure. He wants them to think that he’s comfortable and happy and secure. Because he is. But he’ll have to show them. Which means telling everyone.

“Is he—did he—are you okay?” David’s obviously holding back a bunch of questions that he wants to ask, and Patrick is grateful to him for doing it.

Patrick turns to him, hand on his shoulder, stopping him from walking. “I’m fine. Really. It’s nothing, he’s just kind of an asshole and I guess . . . I guess I kept thinking about him, and I got annoyed out of proportion to the situation.”
“Ronnie can be kind of an asshole too,” David puts in, his smile unsure.

“Yeah, but in a good way,” Patrick sighs, because he likes the ways in which Ronnie is an asshole. She gets things done, and doesn’t care what people think about it. Patrick wishes he could figure out how to not care what people think, sometimes.

“You don’t talk about your family that much. I mean, other than your parents.”

Patrick takes David’s hand and kisses him gently, there on the residential sidewalk in the daylight. Then he keeps walking, urging David along with him, interlacing their fingers so they can hold hands as they go.

“I can tell you about my cousins, if you want,” he says. It’s as close as he can get right now to what he really wants, what he really needs to do. The parts of his life that he needs to reconcile.

“Sure,” David says, softly. “I’d like that.”

So for the rest of the day, while they make lunch and enjoy their sudden half-day off, Patrick tells him stories: about the sprawling outdoor games of hide and seek; about the disastrous road trip vacation to the Alberta Badlands and the West Edmonton Mall they all took when he was about six; about Hallie’s rough teenage years; about his Aunt Ruby making Patrick and Neil play music for the family whenever they were all together; about the time Victoria broke her leg while they were all out skidooing. The good stories, the ones that make him miss his family.

“It sounds nice,” David says, later on, when they’re driving back to the store. Ronnie had texted them that the job was done; it’d only taken a few more hours, in the end. “Growing up like that.”

“You didn’t have extended family? You don’t talk about it either.”

David shrugs. “Not much to talk about. My mom has a sister, but we never saw her, except every few years when she’d visit with some trashy guy she was dating and get drunk with him in the guest house. My dad had an older brother who died before Alexis was born, I don’t really remember him. We don’t have any cousins.”

“Was that—hard? Did you wish it were different?”

“I mean. Does it surprise you to know that I was kind of a weird solitary child?” He glances over at Patrick, who smiles back at him. “I liked our nanny Adelina better than I liked most of the other kids. And Alexis was more than enough to keep track of, God, if I’d had additional people to look after I don’t think I would’ve survived my twenties.”

Patrick smiles, reaching across the console to squeeze David’s thigh. “You’re a good brother,” he says.

David doesn’t say anything at first, so Patrick glances at him again. David’s expression is soft. Surprised. “Thank—thank you,” David says.

Patrick wonders what it’s like to come out to your family when your family is so small, whether that makes it easier. Whether it would be easier if there were fewer people who already have an image of Patrick in their mind, an idea of who he is that he’s going to have to destroy. On the other hand, maybe it’s harder, if there are so few people around you and you’re worried you’ll lose them. He blows out a breath through his nose.

“Maybe I should go talk to Ronnie,” he says, as he pulls over on the street outside the store. “Say sorry again.”
“You can take over the blue cheese,” David agrees, kissing him lightly before getting out of the car. “I’ll stay here and start cleaning up.”

*

Karen opens the door, raises an eyebrow at him, and walks away, leaving the door open behind her. “Ronnie,” she calls. “Patrick’s here.”

Patrick waits, and eventually Ronnie comes to the door.

“I brought you that blue cheese,” he says, holding up the wedge of it.

“Thanks,” Ronnie says. She crosses her arms and cocks her head at him, like she’s trying to work something out.

“And I really am sorry,” he says. “I think I was—well. It wasn’t about you, but I kind of took it out on you.” It reminds him, suddenly, of Jack, of Jack yelling at Melissa, throwing his weight around, punching Patrick in the face when his authority was threatened. Patrick thought he was better than that, or, or over that. It’s painful to recognize that disgusting impulse in himself.

“I see,” she says.

“I guess Jack’s not the only asshole in town,” he adds, trying to make this clear to her. She raises an eyebrow, and the ghost of a smile plays on her mouth.

“Well, we’ve all got something we gotta work on,” she says. Patrick replies with a tentative half-smile. After a second, she holds out her hand. Patrick gives her the cheese.

Ronnie brings it up to her nose, smelling it through the plastic. “I love this stuff,” she sighs. “Looks like hell and should be disgusting, but it’s the best.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says. “Anyway, I guess I should—”

“Your team ready for the big game?” Ronnie asks.


“Unfortunately for you, my team is also totally stacked. Superstars for days.”

“Oh, so your second baseman isn’t afraid of the ball anymore? Did Terry finally came back from maternity leave to replace him? Or, uh, shit—” he pauses, not sure what to call it in this case. “Parent leave?”

“Parental leave,” Ronnie laughs. She leans one shoulder against the doorframe. “Yeah, they did, and second base is back to what it used to be.”

“So, not nearly as good as what it was when I played the position.”

“Tell yourself that if it makes you feel better,” Ronnie says. There’s the edge of a smile playing around her mouth. “You could barely replace Terry when they were seven months pregnant. We’re gonna destroy you.”

“We’ll see,” Patrick replies. He wants to say something else to her, something beyond their usual banter and trash talk. He grasps for the things he knows about her, stuff she’s said on games nights or during baseball practice, stuff he’s learned at the shindigs. “Are your nephews coming to the game?”
Ronnie blinks at him, then nods. “Yeah,” she says. “Their mom’s dragging them along.”

“Your sister,” Patrick guesses.


“Family can be weird like that,” Patrick says.

“Yeah. Well. My brother never forgave me for being better than him at our dad’s business.”

Patrick smiles, because he can see that, Ronnie fighting to be the one to inherit the way she fought to be on town council. “So your dad was a contractor? Taught you the business?”

“Yeah,” Ronnie says, sighing. “He was a good man. Not perfect, but I still miss him. He passed a few years ago.”

Patrick wonders how Ronnie told her dad that she was gay, that she was marrying a woman. If she and Karen had a big ceremony, if her dad walked her down the aisle. “I’m sorry,” he says. He feels awkward, expressing condolences while he’s still standing here on the stoop.

“It’s okay,” Ronnie says, gently. Then she shakes her head, as if shaking away the feeling that came over her. “Anyway, don’t think you’re gonna soften me up any for the game, acting all nice all of a sudden.”

“I am nice,” Patrick protests. Ronnie laughs.

“Okay, rookie,” she says.

“You mean captain,” Patrick says. “See you at the game.”

Ronnie waves him away and closes the door.

As he drives home, Patrick thinks about Ronnie learning to paint and drywall at her father’s knee, and he thinks about his own dad, and his uncle, and his late grandfather. About what you inherit when you’re not even looking to do it.

* 

That week, all anyone talks to Patrick about is the big game. People are actually going to show up to watch, first of all because of the Patrick-poaching-Gwen-from-Ronnie drama, and on top of that, because the thing about the bathroom renovation has also gotten around town, presumably thanks to Roland. But Patrick has faith in his team. He thinks, with all of them working together, they can do it, they can win.

Which is why it’s so infuriating when Gwen calls and tells him that she can’t make it.

“But you’re half the reason for all the rivalry in the first place!” Patrick protests. “And you’re our star hitter!”

“Oh, the team will be fine without me,” Gwen insists breezily. “My internet friend needs me more than you do.”

Patrick keeps protesting—surely Gwen’s internet friend can recover from her bad breakup on her own—but Gwen just talks over him with cheerful goodbyes and hangs up the phone. Patrick works really hard not to claw his own eyes out in pure frustration.
He asks literally everyone he can think of: Ray, with his good bowling arm, and Hannah, who does lumberjack competitions, and Derrick, who’s graceful and athletic, and even Joon-ho, who laughs at him and says no about twenty times.

“Also, no one wants to get on Ronnie’s bad side,” Joon-ho says, “so it might be hard to find anyone.”

“I heard Ronnie’s team is also down a player, though, and she also can’t find anyone,” Patrick says. Ronnie had recruited Stevie for a hot minute, which Stevie had presumably agreed to so that she could troll Patrick about it, but then Stevie dropped out again to focus on *Cabaret*.

“Well, no one wants to get on your bad side, either,” Joon-ho replies. “Now stop blowing up my phone and let me get back to this conference paper I’m writing.”

“I would help you with your conference paper, if you asked me,” Patrick says, plaintively. “Because I’m a good friend in a time of need.”

“Nope,” Joon-ho says, and hangs up.

So, on the day of the game, Patrick ends up asking David to do it.

“We’ve been here before,” David murmurs, as Patrick hands over Victor’s spare uniform, fresh and folded. Their hands brush together over the soft material.

“Try not to get too excited. I know how you are about sports uniforms,” Patrick says, kissing him on the cheek again, as another thank you.

David’s lips twist into a smile. “Yes, my well-known fetish,” he replies.

Patrick can’t help but drum his fingers on the table while he waits, and when David comes out of the bathroom, he’s a vision.

“I think you look very cute,” Patrick says. David in this outfit is definitely doing it for him. God, even David’s usual necklace, in this context, makes him look like Marcus Stroman or Giancarlo Stanton, one of the players who likes a little subtle bling. It’s a look Patrick has... well. He guesses he’s always liked it, the little flashes of gold or silver against tanned skin and uniform collars. He decides not to tell David about the time Yoenis Céspedes broke a necklace sliding into second and sent diamonds flying everywhere. He doesn’t want David to change a thing.

“That’s a given,” David says, which makes Patrick smile, because, yeah. It is. They work through the other fashion issues and learn that actually Bob’s Garage is fielding David’s dad against them, which should be something to watch. Ronnie and Roland show up to talk to Mr Rose, and Patrick grits his way through another session of trash talk with her, back to their regular back and forth. He loses this round, badly, but he’s hoping he won’t lose the game.

Without Gwen, they’re down a hitter, and even though their defense is sharp, they can’t quite keep up with Ronnie’s team for runs. They fight hard: Jeff pitches for all he’s worth, and Patrick can see Melissa deliberating over the calls behind home plate, and Victor and Wondo actually manage to communicate the whole game and not run into each other chasing the same ball, which makes Patrick so proud.

His team. They’ve worked so hard. He can’t bear to lose now, he just can’t.

But despite their efforts, by the bottom of the ninth things aren’t looking good. Ronnie comes over to taunt him again, and Patrick starts desperately looking for a way to pinch-hit for David, which
obviously pisses David off a little. Patrick winces as David steps up to the plate, caught between wanting to be a good person and wanting to win.

It’s that Uncle Doug impulse, that Jack impulse. He doesn’t always know where it starts or ends. And it’s a lot easier to kick Jack out of municipal sports than it is to kick that impulse out of yourself. He frowns, watching David getting more and more annoyed with him. He takes David’s cap while David puts on the batting helmet, and doesn’t say anything more. David taps the plate with the bat, and Patrick takes a deep breath.

“Ronnie, throw the thing,” David calls.

When David swings at Ronnie’s first pitch and that loud, sharp crack echoes out over the field, everything else fades from Patrick’s mind. He’s caught up at first, yelling instructions, hope flaring through him as Mr Rose fails to field the ball right away. But as David rounds third he stops yelling, because the drama playing out before him is too perfect: the ball arcing through the air, David diving, his gloved hands reaching for the plate: it’s like a dream Patrick’s having, it’s so beautiful.

The ump calls safe and they win, they actually win the game, his little team. Because of David. The team crowds in close, everyone jumping up and down, hugging, screaming, and it’s just like it used to be, in high school, just like it used to be, the team united in joy and purpose, coming together, falling together in a wild spinning perfect knot of humanity. Patrick has missed this, so much.

“We’re no longer really shitty!” Melissa yells, and everyone else takes up the cry with her.

And there in the centre of the knot with him is Patrick’s boyfriend, who hit the game-winning home run, smiling and laughing with them. Patrick kisses him there, in the middle of the huddle, on the field in the sunlight, and it’s everything he ever wanted, everything.

* 

He finds Ronnie after the barbecue and offers his hand. “Good game,” he says.

She sighs and takes his hand, shaking once, firmly, before dropping it. “Good game,” she agrees. “Never thought I’d see Jeff as a star pitcher. He had some heat out there.”

“He had it in him,” Patrick says, but smiles, accepting the compliment for his coaching, too. “And Terry actually is way better than I am on second. They made some great plays.”

“Yeah, they really left it all on the field,” Ronnie agrees, looking over at Terry approvingly.

“Gonna be a hell of a season next year, I guess,” Patrick says. “Good thing I’ve got a decent captain to play against.”

“I’ll show you decent,” Ronnie threatens, lightly. “Spring training is gonna start early.”

“I can’t wait,” Patrick grins.

* 

When he gets David back to the apartment after the game, he can’t keep his hands off of him, his body strong and thick in the uniform, his thighs and chest still dirty from that final glorious slide.

“Surprised you lasted this long,” David laughs, as Patrick pushes him up against the door and tries to make his shaking hands undo their belts. “You didn’t give any of this away back at the barbecue.”
“Oh, I was saving it,” Patrick says. “Waiting to get you somewhere I could really show my appreciation for how incredibly hot you look in this.”

“Well,” David says, grinning into a kiss. “Put me in, coach.”

Patrick laughs, horrified, into David’s shoulder. “Oh, I’m gonna,” he says, and gets on his knees, pulling David’s cock out of his uniform pants. “Anything for my star player.”

David’s laugh is like running water, simple and free. His hands come down to cup Patrick’s face as Patrick starts to suck him. “What’s gonna be next? We already did hockey. Are you gonna dress me for lacrosse? Make me play basketball?”

Patrick pulls off slowly, savouring the taste and the heat and the weight of David’s cock on his tongue. “Maybe get you into one of those pretty figure skating outfits,” he suggests, looking up.

David’s thighs shudder under Patrick’s palms, and he looks down at Patrick, eyes hot. “I’m into it,” he says. “Let’s try it.”

It makes Patrick feel shivery, confident, reckless. He wants to try it all.

*  

They shower together, afterwards, Patrick’s hands sliding with the soap over David’s body, washing away the hard-earned grime.

“So is this normal, for the locker room?” David teases, pressing his body back against Patrick’s, their warm wet skin pressed together from knees to shoulders. Patrick wraps his hands around David’s waist, soap still in his hand, washing his belly, his thighs, his cock.

“No,” he laughs. “It’s much, much better.”

David turns around slowly, grabbing a bottle from the shower caddy. It’s the shampoo he uses, when he’s here; Patrick doesn’t usually bother with it. David works it into his short hair, fingertips pressing in, massaging. Patrick lets himself close his eyes and take it.

“Feels good,” he says. Then he swallows. “I like when you take care of me.”

David smiles among the rivulets of water streaming down his face. “I like it too.”

Later, when they crawl into bed together, skin warm and damp, Patrick kisses David’s neck, and his hands, and his shoulders through his sweatshirt, soft skimming desperate little kisses.

“What’s gotten into you?” David asks, a little sleepy.

“I’m really sorry I was such a jerk,” he says.

“You already said,” David sighs. He’s drifting off. “I just wish you would save that bossy energy for the bedroom.”

Patrick lies awake for a while, stroking David’s hair, thinking about that.

*  

“How’s your back feeling?” he asks David the next day, running his hand lightly over the spot where the baseball hit him. David squirms a little, from side to side, as if he’s asking his body the same question.
“Hurts a little. More now that I’m no longer awash with the glow of victory and surrounded by the smell of barbecue.”

“Ah, well, you’re still a hero to me,” Patrick says, squeezing his arm.

“And the barbecue?”

“Fresh out, sorry.”

“Hmph.”

They’re in Patrick’s apartment, in that cozy hour well after dinner and well before sleep, the two of them sharing space in a way that Patrick finds more and more appealing, these days. He likes being present in the same room as David, without work or the pressing need to have sex in a snatched moment of privacy. Just the two of them reading, or watching tv, or on their phones, touching casually, breaking the silence now and then to tell each other about something they’ve seen.

Patrick’s having trouble concentrating on his phone or his book, though; he’s still thinking about the final play of the game yesterday. He keeps thinking back on how it felt to see that beautiful swing and hear the crack of connection as David hit the ball for him, how it felt to watch him round the bases, to drop the bat when Patrick told him to, to move like that just because he knew it’d make Patrick happy, and pleased with him, and proud of him.

He’s also been thinking back to how much of an asshole he was, caught up in the competition. The part that needs to win, the part that hates to be a pushover. The controlling part. The Uncle Doug part. We really don’t need to meet him again, David said, and Patrick agrees. He wants to know the difference between those two Patricks, between the one who’s worthy of David’s trust and the one who’s not.

He doesn’t want to bring that ugly, fearful part of himself into his relationship with David, anymore than he wants David to bring in his bad habits from previous relationships. But he does want a different kind of control, the kind that will push both of them to do new things, to experience things as beautiful as a grand slam in the bottom of the ninth. His heart aches for it.

David looks over at him slyly. “Why are you asking about my back? Are you concerned about straining it for some reason?”

“Oh, no, not at all.”

“So you don’t have any other physical activities planned, like maybe, I don’t know, pilates, or like extreme snowboarding . . .?”

“Nothing comes to mind.” Patrick replies, breezily. He takes a breath, turns to face David on the couch. “Though, now that you mention it . . .”

“Mm-hm?”

“I was wondering if you still had certain . . . activities in mind. After the game.” David blinks at him, so Patrick huffs out a breath and says, “If you’re still interested in me giving you orders. Pushing you around. Since you got a little sick of it yesterday.”

“Oh,” David says, “Oh! No, that was—I told you, it’s different.” He gives Patrick a puzzled look.

“Were you turned on when you were yelling at me on a baseball field?”

“No, no,” Patrick says. “More—the opposite of that. I don’t wanna be that guy in bed.”
“See?” David asks triumphantly. “Context.”

Patrick laughs, because maybe it’s really that easy. Or maybe it can be that easy, if they talk it through, if they do it together. There’s a difference, he thinks, between wanting to control someone and . . . and exploring the idea of control alongside them.

He makes the decision to ask.

“So,” he says, slowly, running a hand up David’s thigh. “Are you interested in trying for something more tonight? More than what we’ve been doing?” He licks his lips. “Like. A whole scene?”

“That—I’m very—yes. I.” David’s brow furrows. “Yes, I am definitely interested in that,” he finishes, looking annoyed at himself. “If you are.”

“I’ve been thinking about it. A lot,” Patrick says, and David looks gratifyingly interested.

“Doing research. Making lists,” he teases, reaching for Patrick’s arm, pulling him in.

“Yes,” Patrick agrees, before they kiss. It’s hot, full of anticipation and nerves, sharp bites and lots of tongue, filthy, a little needy.

“My back feels fine now,” David breathes, against him. Patrick laughs.

Okay. So. What if this were your one hour warning? Would that be okay?”

“I mean, do we really need to wait an hour?” David asks. Patrick shakes his head, grinning.

“Yup,” he says. “It’s what you wanted.”

David sighs. “Fine.” He glances down at his phone, maybe marking the time, and scrolls through Instagram for about two thumb swipes before looking back up. “A whole hour?”

“You could go take a shower,” Patrick suggests. A thought occurs to him, and he voices it: “Get yourself clean for me.”

This makes David’s eyes widen, and he draws a shaky little breath; it’s such a strong reaction that Patrick wonders if he should’ve made the shower part of the scene, rather than part of the prep. He imagines it, going in there with him, directing David to wash himself, to clean out his ass. He imagines giving David an enema. The idea makes him want to squirm, it’s so hot, so unexpected, so far from what they’ve done before. But. Maybe not for right now.

Keep it together, Brewer, he tells himself. One thing at a time.

“Okay,” David says, softly, and kisses him again before he gets up. His hand trails along Patrick’s shoulder as he leaves. Patrick watches him as he gathers some stuff up from his section of the wardrobe, and then as he closes the door to the bathroom behind him. Patrick counts off ten seconds, and then he gets up to find something to distract himself with.

By the time David comes back out, half an hour later, Patrick’s finished the dishes, swept the kitchen floor, tried and failed to read his book for about ten minutes, and lit the candles in the fireplace and around the apartment.

David’s wearing fresh clothes, but not his sleepwear: his white acid-wash jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt with a wide collar that exposes his collarbones. He looks so good. He’s a little damp, around the hairline, where he probably tilted his head back to keep his hair out of the water. Patrick
wants to throw away his whole plan and just drop to his knees in front of him, push him against the wall and take him down hungrily like he did last night, taste his clean skin all over his tongue. But. He likes his plan. He’s ready to try it.

“Oh, this looks very nice,” David says, glancing at the candles. Patrick tends to only light them when he’s having a bunch of friends over.

“No reason we can’t have a little romance,” Patrick says, which makes David grin. “You’ve got about twenty-five minutes.”

David swallows, and nods. “Will you—come sit with me?”

Patrick does. “We don’t have to do this, if you don’t want to,” Patrick says, noticing David’s apprehension.

“Oh, I want to,” David says. He cuddles up against Patrick, drawing his legs up onto the couch. His feet are bare, Patrick notices. He leans into David and wraps a hand around his exposed ankle, just under the cuff of his jeans.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” Patrick asks. “Preferences? Hard limits?”

“Don’t you have a questionnaire?”

“Left it in my other pants.” Actually, he memorized it, but same difference.

David takes a breath, lets it out slowly. “I want what I told you.”

“Push you around, put you where I want you, tell you what to do, make you do it when you don’t do it right away. Make you feel wanted. Manhandling okay, no outright hitting.” Patrick says, dutifully, meeting his eyes. This gets him raised eyebrows from David. Patrick’s glad he wrote all that down, after David said it, so he wouldn’t forget.

“Yeah,” David says, eventually. He clears his throat. “That’s it. That’s great.”

“David. You know it’s always very helpful for me to understand your overall vision for a project.”

David chuckles, ducking his head against Patrick’s arm. “I’m so glad.”

“But I’m gonna need some more details, at this stage. Safeword?”

“Yeah, um. I used to use peppermint, if that’s okay.”

That’s a relief, that David has one he feels comfortable with. Okay. He nods. Now the hard part.

“Are you going to be telling me no, or telling me to stop when you don’t mean it? Like. When you want me to keep going?”

David kisses his shoulder, on top of his sweater. “I don’t have to.”

“Okay, so. Strictly speaking, none of this really falls into the category of have to. Do you like that? If I keep going when you say no?”

David nods against him.

“Words, David,” Patrick says, firmly, and David sits up to look at him, astonished.

“Thought I still had twenty minutes,” he teases. Patrick shrugs. David takes a second, then says, “I
really like it.”

Patrick nods. “Can you maybe tell me more about why?”

David blows out a breath. “It’s hard to articulate,” he says, slowly.

“Oh.” Patrick runs his hand up and down David’s ankle, slowly.

“I guess a lot of it is—like, there are sets of rules to follow, and if I break them, if I fuck up, no matter what, you’re still going to make me follow them. I can mess up and be a brat and it doesn’t matter, because you can still keep me under control.”

In his mind, Patrick puts this together with the other part David told him about before, about feeling wanted. Feeling wanted even if you’re a brat, or, or an asshole, feeling wanted no matter what you say or do. Patrick can feel that, can feel why it’s so hot.

Patrick licks his lips, thinking about it, about how hot it is, and how new. How much he wants to give it to David, how much he wants to make sure that David’s safe. Safe with him.

“I’ve never—done anything like that before,” he says, eventually. “The part where you say no, I mean. I think I—well, I’m not sure how it’ll go. So maybe, we can do it a little, but not the whole time.”

“You know you can have a safeword, too,” David says. “You can even borrow mine.”

Patrick kisses him, grateful. “Okay.” That makes the anxiety around that question settle, leaving a cool, humming sense of confidence in its place. He thinks back to the other stuff he wanted to know.

“How much manhandling is too much?”

“I mean . . . don’t break anything? Or make me bleed?”

Now Patrick’s the one surprised. “Really? That’s it? You usually talk about it for an hour if you stub your toe.”

“I don’t know how many times I have to tell you that this context is different,” David says, nettled, and Patrick puts his hands up in surrender. David glances at him. “I suppose you’re going to tell me you used to be on the wrestling team or something and know a bunch of ways to make someone hurt a lot without bleeding?”

“I wasn’t on the wrestling team,” Patrick says, a little annoyed. Then he sighs, giving in. “But I did know guys who were. And they showed me some stuff.”

“Mmm, I bet they did. All that rough and tumble in your parents’ basements, strong bodies pressed together, shirtless, laughing and sweating, trying to pin one another.”

“That’s . . . an annoyingly accurate description,” Patrick says, and David laughs.

“What other details do you want? Honestly it doesn’t have to be this complicated, you can just shove me around a little bit and then fuck me over the back of the couch like we’ve been doing and I’ll be happy.”

“Oh, I think I can make you happier than that,” Patrick says, voice low. David cuddles in against him again, smiling. “We talked about—me calling you good. Telling you that you’re a good boy.”

“That is a definite yes. Especially—like. Making me work for it.”
"That" thought turns Patrick on like he’s an engine, revving; it’s unexpected and . . . yeah. It fits in with all the other pieces. He can fit that into his plan. He squirms, a little, and squeezes David’s shoulder.

“I, uh. Really like that idea,” he says.

“Oh? How fortunate,” David replies, meeting his eyes, heat behind them.

He swallows, then asks more. “Is it like, good the way that a dog is good? Do you want to be treated like a pet?”

David’s quiet for a while, which Patrick thinks means that he’s got some baggage about that one. After a while, he says, “Not a dog. Not—any animal. But like . . . a human pet. Someone special. Valued.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, and kisses his forehead. “You know I value you as you are, right?”

“Yes.” David says, shortly. Patrick runs his fingertips through his hair, just behind his ear.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says, just because it’s what he’s thinking.

“God, Patrick, how much longer,” David breathes. “And can we shorten this time period in the future?”

“Fifteen minutes, and I’m gonna go with no, unless you have good reasons why.”

“Ugh. You really are a very cute dom.”

“Thank you.” He kisses David one more time, then stands up. “I’m gonna go get cleaned up,” he says, feeling a little hot, a little awkward. “Do me a favour?”

In the absence of Patrick’s body to prop him up, David stretches, lying sprawled on the couch. His shirt rides up a little, revealing a patch of stomach, a hint of dark hair; his hands are up over his head, and his legs are hanging off the side, bare feet dangling. He looks like fucking porn. “Anything you want,” he says.

Patrick swallows. “Don’t touch yourself, while I’m gone.”

David licks his lips deliberately, holding his gaze. “All right.”

Patrick gets out of there before he’s the one asking to shorten the waiting period.

He does a much more abbreviated cleanup than he suspects David did, just getting off some of the grit and sweat of the day, and he brushes his teeth and puts some lotion on his hands and face, so he’ll be nice and soft. After, he looks himself in the mirror. He just looks like his regular self. He nods at his reflection, for strength, then goes back out.

David’s still sprawled on the couch, like he’d been holding himself still, waiting for Patrick. Or else he fell asleep.


“Mmm,” David says, and stretches, full-length, toes pointing at one end and fingertips reaching at the other, his back arching up off the couch. “Just thinking about how fucking hot you are,” he says, and tilts his head back, looking at Patrick upside-down. “Imagining what you’re gonna do to me.”
Patrick goes over to him and kneels on the couch, straddling his hips, bracing his arms on either side of his head. “You know you don’t have to be . . . any different, for this,” he says, softly. “I mean, you’re so hot, lounging around like some supermodel, you get me so hot, but you don’t have to . . . be anyone else.”

David nods slowly, meeting his gaze. “Okay,” he says, voice gravelly. “What if I just am this sexy, naturally?”

“Then I guess I’m in trouble,” Patrick says, and kisses him, hand soft on his jaw, mouth open, letting himself feel the warm wet vulnerability of David’s tongue and lips against him.

“Mmm, you used that lotion,” David says, running the pad of his thumb over Patrick’s cheek.

“Yeah. Someone told me it’d make me touchable.”

“They were right,” David says, delighted. His other hand comes up, so both thumbs can stroke over Patrick’s skin at the same time. “You’re so pretty.”

Patrick blushes, just a little, closing his eyes and accepting David . . . petting him.

The alarm on his phone goes off; he takes it out of his pocket.

“You set an alarm?” David grins. Patrick nods seriously.

“Which means it’s time for you to do what I tell you,” he says. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

He cups David’s cock, outside of his jeans, and he’s half hard, probably hard enough to be uncomfortable in something this tight. He leans down and puts his lips next to David’s ear while he squeezes with his hand.

“Did you listen to me? Or did you touch yourself?”

“Oh, I was good,” David says, on a breathy laugh, pushing up against Patrick’s hand. Patrick moves his hand off of David’s cock, onto his hip, and pushes him down against the couch to still his movement.

“You’re gonna get off when I tell you,” Patrick says. “I’m gonna make it happen. Not you. All right?”

David nods, biting his lip, but then as soon as Patrick lets go his hips twitch up again, pushing his cock against Patrick’s thigh.

Patrick grips his hip again, hard, hard enough that he’ll probably leave marks even through the fabric, and shakes his head. “Stop it.”

“Don’t wanna,” David says. Patrick shakes him by the hip, roughly, making David’s eyes widen, and then speaks softly.

“I think you can do better. Be good for me.”

At that, David’s breathing picks up. Patrick feels a thrill go through him, at getting it right, at making David feel this way. God. He likes this already.

“Put your ass down on the couch,” he says, and David does. His eyes are bright, interested; Patrick loves that, the way this makes David’s wandering, multilayered attention focus right in on him.
Patrick thinks for a minute. He planned to do this somewhere with more space, but they sort of started out on the couch by accident. There’s something to be said for going with the moment, but he is still a little worried about David’s back.

“Stay there.” He gets up, backs away, and sits down in one of the chairs instead. David watches him go. Patrick takes another second, working it through in his mind.

“You’re good at this,” David murmurs, from his place on the couch, the place Patrick put him. “You’re really good at it so far. Tell me where you want me.”

Patrick smiles; David’s head is turned to look at him and he’s smiling back, and it eases his anxiety a little. He reminds himself of David’s vision: being taken, being wanted. Being controlled. He thinks through the next steps. He wants this. He thinks it’ll be good, for both of them.

“Stand up in front of me,” he says. David does, putting his hands uncharacteristically behind his back. Patrick wonders if that’s indicative of something. It’s interesting.

“You’re so hot,” Patrick says, looking him up and down. “I need to see you. Take off your shirt.”

David crosses his arms at the hem and pulls it off his body inside-out. To Patrick’s shock, he tosses it onto the back of the couch, not even watching where it lands.

“Kneel down here, baby,” Patrick says, spreading his legs. David doesn’t, right away, so Patrick says it again, quieter, slower. “Get on your knees. I wanna feel you.”

David does it, putting his bare skin within Patrick’s reach. Patrick reaches out to grasp his shoulders, hard.

“What’re you gonna do with me?” David asks, eyes dancing. “In this position?”

“Get your cock out,” Patrick says, breathless. “Show it to me.”

This time, David’s hesitation isn’t him being bratty; Patrick thinks it’s just surprise, which is gratifying.

Patrick takes advantage of it, takes a risk, hand shooting out to grab him by the hair. “What’d I say to do?”

David’s hands go down to his fly, but Patrick curls his fist tighter, giving him a little shake. “David. Words. What’d I say.”

“You said to get my cock out.” David repeats, chest moving fast, up and down, with his breath. “And?”

“And show it to you.”

Patrick nods. “Good. You gonna do that for me?”

“Yeah,” David says. “Yes.” His hands are not quite as steady as usual, as he does it. He’s a lot harder, now, than he was back on the couch, cock springing up into his hand as soon as he pushes his jeans a little ways down his hips. Patrick loosens his hand in David’s hair, but doesn’t let go completely.

“That’s good. David, that’s so good. Don’t stroke it, just hold it, that’s right. Is that for me?”
“All for you,” David agrees, panting.

“You look so good, like that, kneeling for me. Showing off for me.”

“Yeah?” David chokes out. The hand not holding his dick is balled into a fist on his own thigh, knuckles rubbing hard against the denim. “You like it?”

Patrick releases his grip so he can run his fingers gently through David’s hair. They’re leaning in towards each other, now, neither of them able to resist the pull of it, the tension between them. “I love it,” he says, honestly. “David. I love you.”

David looks up at him, sharply.

“I love you,” Patrick says, again, breathing it into being in the air between them.

“I love you too,” David says, eyes wide with wonder, voice hoarse.

Patrick kisses him quickly on the lips. “What else are you gonna do for me? Are you gonna do everything I say?”


“Gonna be good for me.”

David nods. “Yeah.”

“If I told you to fuck your fist right now, how fast do you think you’d come?”

“Pretty—pretty fast,” David groans. His knuckles rub even harder against his thigh, and Patrick can see the muscles of his arm flexing, as if he’s actively resisting the urge to give in and do it.

Patrick tilts his head up and kisses his mouth, softly. “I’m not gonna tell you to do that,” he murmurs. “Take your hand off your dick, David.”

David whines, but lets go.

“You don’t get to come for a long time yet,” Patrick tells him. “Stand up. Take off your clothes. I wanna see all of you.”

David doesn’t make a show out of it, just shoves his jeans the rest of the way down and pulls them off his ankles, stepping away so that he’s standing in Patrick’s living room entirely naked. It’s not something David does often; it’s not like Patrick hasn’t noticed. David doesn’t like to be naked when Patrick’s not naked, or when Patrick’s not touching him. It’s not shame or shyness, he doesn’t think, so much as just . . . protectiveness, avoidance of vulnerability.

He’s vulnerable now, standing before Patrick, chest moving fast with his breath, dark hair fanning over his chest and down his belly to his hard cock, thighs thick, hips and shoulders canted at an angle, mouth gleaming and wet where he’s licked it. Patrick takes the opportunity to look at him, all of him, raking his gaze up and down David’s body, obvious, appreciative.

David’s eyes are dark, pupils wide.


His hands twitch hesitantly at first, but then he does, rubbing them with his thumbs, rolling and pinching them hard. His eyes squeeze closed.
“That’s it,” Patrick says, trying not to groan. He stands up, runs his hands up over David’s thighs, to his flanks, to his ribs, back down, all over, touching him with wide flat palms so he can get as much skin as he can. “That’s gorgeous. You’re gorgeous. I’m gonna fuck every part of you.”

“Yeah?” David breathes. His fingers go still on his nipples. “You think so?”

“Yeah, David. I fucking think so.”

He doesn’t miss David’s sharp inhale when he swears, can’t help but grin a little at it. He knew that was a thing.

“Get on the bed, David. Face down. Spread your legs for me.”

David meets his eyes, licks his lips, and says, “No.”

There’s a long, caught moment between them, then, standing in this quiet space together, candlelight around them, and David’s smiling and breathless and Patrick’s smiling too and the seconds that tick by form a thread between them, connecting them, holding them together. David’s soft no hangs in the air, and it’s delicious, overwhelming, that he trusts Patrick to do this, that Patrick trusts him to say it, that they can make this happen together.

They hold each other’s gaze, teetering on the brink of it, excited, and nervous, and in synch. Then the moment tips over: Patrick grabs him, rough, by the shoulder, and spins him around with his hand pinned behind his back, up high enough to hurt just a little. David lets out a surprised breath, but Patrick doesn’t give him time to recover or get used to it; instead he forces David forward, shoving him the few steps to the bed fast enough to keep him off-balance.

David pushes back, and Patrick pushes harder, and David groans. Like, from his diaphragm. Fuck.

“Why are you being so difficult?” Patrick asks, muscles straining with the effort of it. Patrick’s picked him up and rolled him over and moved him places plenty of times, but David was never pushing against him before, never doing this token struggling that makes it so much more work. Patrick likes the way it feels, the way it makes his body start to sweat with the effort.

He gets him to the bed and pushes him down, face first, careful of his back, and David lands hard on his hands and knees, ass up.

“I’m not,” David protests, over his shoulder.

“You are,” Patrick argues. He strips off his clothes in a hurry. This might not last as long as he thought it would. “You know you are. Get down on your belly.”

David doesn’t, so Patrick has to wrestle him down into that, too, grunting and squirming against him, skin sliding together. When he finally gets him down he’s pressed up against David’s back, naked, both of them spreadeagled with Patrick’s ankles wrapped around David’s calves and his hands pinning his wrists.

Patrick hesitates, then; he doesn’t want to break the scene but he wants to be careful. He scrapes his teeth over the back of David’s neck while he thinks about options. “You doing okay?” he murmurs, into his ear.

“Yeah,” David breathes. “I’m—I’m. Yeah.”

Patrick frowns. It’s not enough, not what he needs. He bites David’s neck, just below his ear, where he usually kisses him. “Words,” he says. “David, I need to hear it.” He bites again, harder. “Tell me
“I like it,” David says, voice so quiet Patrick almost doesn’t hear it, even from this close. “I fucking love it. Patrick. I want you to do it to me more.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, softly. “That was really good. Thank you.”

David’s hips buck beneath him. God, he’s so turned on, and Patrick is too, hard and leaking against David’s ass. He wasn’t sure if he was going to like this part, the pushing-around part, the part where David says no with his words and his body. He’d never want to hurt him, or force him, but this—this feels amazing, like something they’re doing together, pushing them both somewhere new. David’s heaving underneath him, forehead pressed to the sheets, and Patrick wants to do nothing else with the rest of his life except find new ways to make David feel this good.

The rest of his life, the rest of his life, the rest of his life. It sings in him. He takes a breath, lets himself fall into it.

“Now. I told you to get on the bed and spread your legs for me.” He lets up enough that David could do that, if he wanted to, could rock his hips and get his legs wide apart. David keeps breathing, harsh, against the bed. “You want me to force you open? Is that what you want?” He waits a beat. “You want me to make you?”

He kisses David’s back, between his shoulder blades, just over the spine.

“No,” David says, for the second time. It’s a lie, and it thrills through Patrick like an electric shock.

“I could,” Patrick says, sliding a knee between David’s thighs. “Push you open and fuck you right now, for being a brat.”

David presses his forehead against the pillow, breathing hard. “So what’s stopping you? Go ahead and make me.”

Patrick kisses him again, a little lower down on the spine. “No,” he says, and David bucks beneath him again.

Patrick takes a breath, lets it settle between them. He likes this so fucking much.

“I don’t think it’s what you really need, David,” he continues. “I think you’re acting like a brat, but you really want to be good.” He bites him this time instead, lightly, just on the upper curve of his ass. “You want to do what I tell you.”

“Is that right?” David asks, voice high and breathy.

“That’s right.” Patrick kisses down his back, over his hips, soft. “You wanna be good for me, David?”

David doesn’t answer, just breathes.

Patrick scrapes his teeth over David’s ass. “Tell me that you wanna be such a good boy.” He follows the scrape with a hard, unforgiving bite that leaves tooth marks behind. David jumps, yelps. “Tell me.”

His hands fisting in the sheets, David says “No,” a third time.

“Okay.” Patrick says. “Then I’m gonna make you say it.”
He pushes down between David’s legs, holding him open, and doesn’t waste any time, just gets his mouth and tongue on David’s hole and starts eating him out. He goes hard, at first, working himself inside, kissing and sucking as wet and as sloppy as he knows how, bathing David with his tongue. He uses his fingers, too, pressing against David’s perineum from the other side, ramping him up to twitching, and then to squirming, and then to vocalizing, a series of those high, helpless little moans that Patrick loves to draw out of him. Once he’s got him there, he starts to ease off, teasing, alternating light little swipes with deeper pressure, until David’s pushing himself back against Patrick’s mouth, trying to get more.

“Keep doing that and I’ll stop,” Patrick says, and David freezes, then settles back down on the bed. “Good. That’s better.” He goes back to it, that teasing build, that slow alternation between too much and not enough that makes David start whining in his throat.

“Patrick,” he gets out, eventually. “Patrick, please, please—”

“Mmm,” Patrick says, working his rim with his tongue, flicking against it. “Please what?”

“Please, I need—more,” David says, and Patrick can tell he wants to push back again, but doesn’t. Patrick grabs the lube and slicks two fingers up, sliding them into David’s ass instead of his tongue.

“Yeah? You think you deserve more?”

Wordlessly, David shakes his head no against the pillow.

“I don’t think you do either,” Patrick agrees. He moves his fingers against David’s prostate, over and over, slower and slower. David groans. “You haven’t been listening to me. But I think you can earn it. If you wanna be good.” He leans in and fists his free hand in David’s hair again, pulling his head back. “Do you wanna be good?”

“Yeah,” David says, quietly, and a lick of fire rolls through Patrick’s belly. “Yeah. I do.”

“Say it.” Patrick presses in a little harder, moves his fingers even slower. “Tell me you want to be a good boy.”

“I want, I want to be a good boy,” David whines, head turned to press one cheek against the bed, eyes tightly closed. “I wanna be good for you.”

It’s shocking, how intense it feels to have drawn that out of David, how powerful and glad he feels when David says it. Like Patrick built something for him, a net, a safe place to land, and David trusted it enough to let it catch him. Patrick tries to get his breath, tries to keep his voice steady.

“That’s right. That’s right, David, you do. Say it again.” He pulls on his hair, hard, and David gasps.

“I wanna be good, I want you to make me, I wanna be so good for you, Patrick—”

Patrick pulls harder, a reward. “Yeah, you do. Say it again, baby, give it to me again.”

“I wanna be your good boy, please, Patrick, please, make me be good, please.”

“Shhh,” Patrick says, moving his hand down from David’s hair to splay his fingers across David’s back, steadying him. “That’s right. You’re gonna be so good for me. And then I’ll give you what you deserve. Up on your hands and knees, baby.”

David does it immediately, head hanging down between his shoulders. Patrick moves with him, still stroking in and out of him, going a little harder now.
“That’s beautiful, you look so beautiful like that. Doing what I say. Spread your legs. Good.” He shuffles up behind him, running a hand over his hip and down the back of his leg, bending to kiss his side. “I like you all laid out for me. You’re being good now, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” David breathes.


“I’m being good,” David says. “I’m being good, Patrick, I promise—”

“You’re being so good.”

A noise comes out of David’s throat, like a groan, like a sob. “Can I—Patrick, can you, I wanna be—I wanna be good, tie me up so I can be good for you, please, please. You can tie me up and I can be so good that way.”

“I bet you look so pretty all tied up,” Patrick murmurs, still fucking David slow with his fingers. David nods enthusiastically. “You want me to tie you up so you have to do what I want? So you have to listen to me?”

“Yeah, please, please—”

“No,” Patrick says. “I think you’re listening now, David. I think you’re doing so good and you don’t need to be tied.”

“I want, I want—”

“Shhh. I know what you want, baby. I know. I’m not gonna tie you up.” He leans down over him, kissing his ear, sucking his earlobe. “I’m gonna tell you what to do, and you’re gonna be a good boy, and you’re gonna do it. You don’t need to be tied. Turn over.”

He pulls his fingers out while David rolls over. His cock is big and thick and red and Patrick really, really wants to suck it, or touch it, something, but he keeps himself still, makes himself wait. It’ll be better if they both wait, he can feel it.

“Put your hands above your head. Palms up, cross your wrists.”

David blinks up at him, just for a second. Patrick twists his nipple, hard; David cries out. “You can do it. Be good for me. David. Come on.”

He raises his arms, crossing them at the wrists. “I can’t,” he says, voice low and hoarse. “Patrick, I can’t, I need you to—hold me, pin me down, make me—”

Patrick waits, listens for the safeword that doesn’t come. He takes a breath and keeps going, pushes them both forward again.

“You can. David, you can.” He kisses his mouth. “Listen to me. I’m holding you there. I asked you to do it, so I’m holding you there. Because you’re my good boy, and you do what I say.”

David’s eyes widen. “Okay,” he says, voice gravelly.

“You’re so hard for me. Look at you. Laid out like this. You wanna come, baby?”

David nods, whimpers, thrusts his hips up once. Patrick bends and kisses him, just soft lips, gentle.
“You’re not gonna come till I’m all done with you. You’re so pretty. I’m gonna fuck you.”

“Patrick, Patrick, I can’t—stay still—”

“You can.”

The steps are simple, familiar, something he’s done a hundred times before: condom, more lube, moving David’s legs up over his shoulders. But this feels different, just with David’s hands above his head, that one little symbol of what they’re doing here, what they’re making. Patrick sinks down into him.

“Keep your hands up there, sweetheart,” Patrick says. “Don’t touch yourself.”

“I wanna come. Patrick. Please.” David huffs out, moving his hips with Patrick, angling to meet him. His wrists stay crossed, the soft undersides of his arm exposed, and Patrick bends to kiss him there, just above the dark hair of his armpit, to kiss and suck a little mark onto that cool unfreckled skin. He finds their rhythm: long, deep, slow thrusts that take forever, that take the entire age of the universe, as he fills David up from the inside out.

“You’re not—gonna come—till I say,” Patrick grits out, lost in the tight heat of David’s ass around him.

“Not gonna, gonna come at all. If you’re not—touching me, Patrick, please,” David replies.

“Oh no? Can’t you?”

“Patrick, God, let me—let me—” He starts shifting a little, not quite bringing his hands down but getting ready to, and Patrick stops him with a word.

“Don’t you fucking move your hands,” he says, breathless. “Don’t you dare.”

David stops, looking up at him. His mouth is wet and his eyes are dark. Patrick speeds up his thrusting, going faster, harder, pushing on David’s thighs to angle him higher.

“You can come on my cock,” Patrick says, because David’s done it before, exactly twice, both times after Patrick had rimmed and fingered the hell out of him first. “Or not at all.”

David throws his head back, groaning, half frustration and half pleasure. He doesn’t move his arms, but his hands ball into fists. Patrick grabs him by the hair, suddenly, making him look up again.


David opens his eyes. His fingers twitch, but he doesn’t move his hands.

“Being so good for me. Keep your hands there. God, I wanna fuck you forever. You’re so fucking beautiful.”

“Patrick,” David gasps, just his name, and then says it again, “Patrick. Patrick.”

“All laid out for me. So good. Fuck. David.”

“Tell me—make me—again, Patrick, fuck, I’m so close, please—”

Patrick fumbles for a second to figure that one out. He puts his lips down to David’s throat, kissing him. “You wanna hear that you’re good? That you’re so good?” He tightens his hand in David’s hair, as hard as he knows David likes it. Sweat is pouring off of him, now, at this frantic pace, and
fuck he wants to come but if David can—if he can make David—he tries again. “Or you want me to make you say it?”

“Make me, please, make me, make me.”

“You wanna be good,” Patrick says, pulling his hair, fucking him hard, biting viciously at his collarbone, loving him, loving him, loving him. “You wanna be good, say it, you wanna be good.”

“I wanna be good for you,” David gasps. “I wanna be—so good—” His hips arch up even further, knees pushing hard against Patrick’s shoulders, cock starting to spurt onto his chest. Patrick groans at the sight of it, David’s eyes closed, head thrown back, coming all over himself because of Patrick’s body, Patrick’s voice. The words flow out of him, tender, soft, desperate.

“You’re good, you’re good for me, you’re being so good, that’s right, that’s it, David, David, so good—”

Patrick finally lets himself let go, lets himself spill out against and inside David’s body, gripping his thighs tight enough to bruise, yelling something, whole body wracked with heaving, shuddering motion as he shakes his way through it.

When he looks up again, David’s eyes are closed and he’s covered in come, his hands still crossed above his head. Patrick eases out slowly, wincing a little at how sensitive he is after that much fucking. David’s ass must be sore. He gets rid of the condom, then leans down and kisses David’s right wrist, which is on top, and then moves it to kiss David’s left wrist underneath.

“Take your hands down,” Patrick says, and David does it easily, automatically. Patrick nudges him, moves him with a single fingertip against his arm or his leg to guide him, and he flows like water in response to Patrick’s touch, bringing his legs down and rolling up onto his side. Patrick lies down and curls to face him, the two of them knee to knee and forehead to forehead.

“You—you okay?” Patrick asks. “How are you doing?”

“Mmm,” David says, like a big cat purring. Patrick strokes his sweaty hair back from his forehead.

“Words, baby,” he says, softly, kissing his cheek.

“Good,” David says, with deep emphasis, and Patrick laughs a little under his breath.

“I think we established that,” he says. He trails his hand down David’s arm to the elbow, looking at the mess dripping through his chest hair. “You’re all messy.”

“Mmm,” David says, again, agreement without urgency.

Patrick kisses his mouth, this time, and that opens his eyes, wakes him up to the world around him. “You want me to get something to clean you? Or you want me to keep touching you?”


He means, right now, in this moment, don’t get up yet, but Patrick hears it like he heard it on their three month anniversary.

“I’ll stay, David,” he says, the truth of that emerging from deep within him. “I promise.”

David cuddles closer, apparently so deep into it that he doesn’t care about getting his cooling semen all over Patrick’s chest, too. Patrick really will have to at least find something close to hand to clean...
them, or else they’ll find themselves welded together later.

“Never done that before,” David murmurs, eyes still closed. Patrick huffs a laugh, doubting it.

“Never?” he asks. He didn’t use any fancy equipment, slings or gags or spreader bars. He didn’t even tie David up.

David’s hand comes up and taps at his sternum. “Never done that feeling. Before,” he clarifies. “You made it. Right.”

Patrick’s filled, suddenly, with relief and pride and contentment. The emotions fill him up, like a cup to the brim, spilling over. Or, more than that, like it’s going to burst out of him somehow, like a star exploding from his chest, lighting up the room.

“I’m glad. I want you to feel right,” Patrick whispers, against his neck. He really should get up and get that washcloth. “That’s all I want.”

“You make me feel right,” David says, in agreement, and nuzzles down into his neck.

*

“What do you want for your birthday?” David asks, a few days later, lying in bed next to him, playing with Patrick’s hand, kissing the fingertips, touching lightly over the knuckles. “I know it’s coming up soon, but I’m kind of short on ideas.”

Patrick’s mom called the store to ask him that same question last week. He thought about all the parties they used to throw for him, how he’d been able to see all the people he loved in one room.

He told her he could use a new pepper grinder.

Twisting his wrist, he takes David’s fluttering hand in his, interlacing their fingers, not letting him escape.

“Just you,” Patrick says. “Just this. I don’t need anything else.”

Chapter End Notes

**I Watched a Bird** by Raymond Souster

I watched a bird blown in the sky  
like some poor thing without control,  
dipping and swerving here and there  
with wings spread wide and motionless

I watched a bird tossed down the wind  
that never fought or uttered cry,  
surrendered to that boundless air,  
caught up in that great mystery.
Despite the dire predictions that David and Patrick make at each other when the store’s slow, Gabe has been coming back in week after week, slapping money down on the counter, sometimes more and sometimes less, and accepting his new tally from Patrick. He always comes in when Patrick’s working, in fact, never—from what David says—when he’s out doing pickups or errands.

“He’s imprinted on you,” David coos, and Patrick glares at him.

Gabe does eventually come in when Patrick and David are both working, though Patrick’s behind the counter and David’s in the back room, so he doesn’t notice David at first.

“Oh, uh, hi,” he says, when David comes out from behind the curtain, carrying a box.

“Hi,” David says, a smirk just hiding behind his lips.

“I’m uh. I’ve been paying down what I owe you.”

“Yeah,” David says. “Patrick told me.”

“I’m sorry about the, um, shoplifting.”

David cocks his head to the side, then sighs and goes to set the box he’s holding down on one of the shelves.

“I suppose you can be forgiven and your ban can be lifted,” he says, rolling his eyes back. “When you’re done paying us, that is. It’s not like I don’t understand the desire to own beautiful things that you can’t afford.”

“Well, but we were, you know. Selling it.”

“Yeah, probably best not to emphasize that point,” David says, quickly.

“Okay.” Gabe kind of smiles, looking shy; he ducks his head to break eye contact with David’s glare.

Patrick watches, fascinated, finding himself holding his breath. He has no idea what’s going to happen next in this conversation.

“It really is a . . . a cool store,” Gabe stutters out. “There’s nothing else like it around. I like it in here.”

It’s a good move, maybe a smart move or maybe a lucky move, but a good one: David, who had the words One Of A Kind stenciled on their window in big letters, is particularly susceptible to compliments about the vibe and uniqueness of the space.

David surprises him, though, with his response. “Hmm. That’s very nice. I’ve heard you say nice things before, though. When you were robbing me.”

Patrick almost wants to give David some signal to go a little easier, to be a little gentler, but Gabe just grins. “I really did like your shoes. The high tops, black and white, with the zipper on the side?”
David glances at Patrick over Gabe’s shoulder, startled, and Patrick just shakes his head, letting out a low whistle. It’s like the kid knows exactly where David’s weak points are. No wonder they got away with so much stuff, before.

Or else he just . . . really liked the shoes.

“Those are Rick Owens,” David says, eventually.

“They’re cool,” Gabe says again.

“Well.” David looks nettled. “You have good taste, then.”

“No one else around here dresses like that. It’s all boring.”

Gabe himself, Patrick’s noticed, always wears the same thing as the rest of the teen boys around here: flannel, t-shirts, jeans, nothing remarkable. The teenager version of what Patrick wears: a uniform.

“Mmm. That’s what makes it easy to stand out,” David says. “If you’re interested in being interesting.”

Gabe just kind of nods at that, then ducks his head again, still nodding. “Anyway,” he says. “Anyway, I came to give Mr Brewer another thirty bucks.”

“Uh-huh,” David says, turning away and putting product on the shelves.

Patrick takes the cash and types dutifully into his laptop. “Down to eighty-five,” he says. “Getting there.”

“Thanks,” Gabe says. He glances hesitantly over at David, whose back is still turned, and then at Patrick again.

“Mr Rose,” Patrick prompts quietly.

“Thanks, Mr Rose,” Gabe says, a little louder.

David turns around, blinking, but Gabe’s already on his way out the door.

“Did that child felon just call me mister?” David asks.

“Mm-hm,” Patrick says, smiling. “He started doing it with me on his own, I didn’t even ask him to.”

“That’ll take some getting used to,” David says.

Patrick comes out from behind the counter, wrapping his arms around David’s waist. “You were very sweet to him.”

“Was I?”

“And still so susceptible to compliments.”

“I wasn’t even wearing those Rick Owens high tops,” David protests, hands on Patrick’s shoulders. “He remembered them. I told you he was the sincere one.”

“Maybe,” Patrick laughs. “Or maybe he was really nervous for you to see him in here, and desperately wanted your good opinion.”
“Hmm,” David says, clearly unsure about which scenario pleases him more.

“Do you think I’m not interesting?” Patrick says, kissing his jaw lightly. David’s shocked into a laugh, which is pretty gratifying.

“No,” he says, simply. “Why?”

Patrick shrugs. “I don’t stand out, around here.”

“You’re interesting in other ways,” David says.

Patrick rolls his eyes. “You mean, in bed?”

David shrugs. “Yes? Extremely so? You’re getting very good at pushing me around and making me beg, which I personally find quite interesting. And, and—I don’t know. You read weird books about forks and you play not-inherently-offensive folk covers of Mariah Carey songs and you. You’re interesting. You’re interesting to me.”

Patrick leans forward, lets a little of the warmth he’s feeling seep into the kiss he gives to David.

“You know, you still haven’t completed your half of the deal we made,” he says. “You were gonna dress me up all pretty.”

“I haven’t forgotten,” David says, arms draped over his shoulders. “I’m almost done. I’ll surprise you sometime soon.” He looks into Patrick’s eyes, brow furrowing. “But you don’t have to wear anything else to be interesting. Or . . . do anything else.”

“I know,” Patrick says, feeling silly for even bringing it up again. “I worry about it, sometimes.”

“I know you do,” David sighs. “But I love you? And I have amazing taste, and that should reassure you plenty.”

“Ohay,” Patrick smiles. That is actually reassuring. “I’m looking forward to my surprise.”

“Good.”

Patrick tells himself he can sink into just one more kiss before he goes to update the weekly expenses.

It ends up being three, but that’s still beating his average, so he counts it as a positive stat.

* 

A few days later, Gabe comes in with more money than usual, and pays himself down a lot, so that Patrick’s revised total is just a little over twenty dollars. Hearing that, Gabe throws his arms in the air, cheering and grinning. David, watching from across the room, shoots Patrick a teasing little smile at the kid’s antics.

“Shut up,” Patrick mouths at him. Gabe doesn’t notice.

“Yes!” Gabe’s yelling. “One more week and the whole paycheque goes to me!”

Patrick smiles. “Where’ve you been working, anyway? You sure this isn’t the ill-gotten proceeds of a crime ring?”
“Down at the True Value,” Gabe says, waving his hand in its general direction. “They need a lot of help over the summer.”

Patrick pauses. He looks up at David, who furrows his brow in a question; he clearly doesn’t remember that detail. Then he looks back at Gabe, and clears his throat, trying to sound normal.

“Doesn’t Jack Dwyer work there?”

“Yeah,” Gabe says. “He’s my boss. He’s okay.”

David sets down the box of shampoo and walks calmly but purposefully back to the counter, putting himself into Patrick’s space.

“I’ve heard he’s kind of an asshole,” Patrick says, carefully. Gabe nods.

“Sometimes. Not too bad, though. People say he used to be worse.”

“Patrick,” David says, in a low tone. Patrick nods, putting his hand on David’s arm, hearing him but not looking at him, not yet.

“Tell you what,” Patrick says, to Gabe, fury rolling within him, just barely holding himself back from making the kid a job offer in that very instant. “Why don’t you come back tomorrow and we’ll talk about some better options.”

“Okay,” Gabe says, looking a little confused.

*

David is not thrilled about the idea of hiring a former shoplifter, but relents when Patrick promises to take full financial responsibility for him and to keep him away from anything more valuable than the float. Actually, he’s pretty sure David relents when Patrick sighs and says he’s worried about the kid, but Patrick makes those promises anyway, to keep himself accountable.

“It’s not like we haven’t been talking about hiring someone to cover the occasional shift,” Patrick points out. “It also means that, maybe in the future, sometime, we could get him and Alexis or him and Stevie to cover and then take a whole weekend away together.” David narrows his eyes at him.

“Just because you know my weakness,” he grumbles.

“Romantic getaways?” Patrick asks.

“You,” David says, pointedly.

“Oh,” Patrick says. His throat feels constricted, tight.

So when Gabe comes back the next day, Patrick offers him a job.

“Is this because of Jack?” Gabe asks, hesitantly.

“It’s because of you,” Patrick says. “We need the help, and we think you can do it. Can you?”

“Yeah,” Gabe says, nodding. “Sure thing, Mr Brewer.”

Hiring Gabe leads to something Patrick wouldn’t have predicted, which is the unique and utterly absorbing spectacle of David tutoring a teenaged boy in the ins and outs of various skincare products. He calls Stevie to come watch, a couple of times, it’s so fascinating and hilarious. The best
part is Gabe dutifully taking notes, and then David secretly looking pleased with himself whenever Gabe takes notes. Well. That and the occasionally smart remarks Gabe dares to throw David’s way. It always throws David right off his game, getting sass from a sixteen-year-old.

Patrick, meanwhile, teaches Gabe how to run the till and the credit card machine, how to clean to his and David’s exacting standards, and how to talk nicely to customers. Even so, David refuses to let him assist customers unsupervised for a long time.

While he works, Gabe asks questions, about Patrick’s past, or David’s, about their hobbies and their friends, about their life together. It’s a kind of scrutiny they haven’t really faced, before, from someone too young to be all that polite or restrained.

“So how’d you and Mr Brewer get together?” he asks David, one afternoon. Patrick perks up: he’d kind of like to hear that story from David’s perspective too.

“We were business partners, here at the store,” David says, simply, easily. “And we fell in love.”

Patrick frowns to keep himself from smiling too hard as he runs the sales figures.

“You forgot the part where you brought your ex-girlfriend along on our first date,” he calls across the room, which earns him a scathing look from David.

“Well, I also didn’t include the part where you were too scared to ask me on a date in the first place,” he replies. “And I had to kiss you first because you chickened out.”

Patrick laughs. He never would’ve thought he’d laugh, at David telling it that way, but he does, he can do it, now. He did chicken out; he was lucky that David didn’t.

“I can’t imagine Mr Brewer being chicken of anything,” Gabe says, grinning.

“Thank you, Gabe,” Patrick says. “It’s a well-established fact that I’m the butch one.”

“What’s that mean?” Gabe asks. He looks a little worried about it, like there are maybe rules he doesn’t understand.

Patrick . . . doesn’t know how to answer that, and he shakes his head, feeling a little panicked. He glances at David for help, who rolls his eyes, but speaks up.

“It’s just a way of talking about some of your feelings about gender roles and stereotypes,” David says, calmly. “Mr Brewer and I are mostly joking about it.” He walks over to Patrick, as he speaks, and plants a kiss on his cheek. “Other people take it more seriously. It can be whatever you want.”

“Oh,” Gabe says.

“There aren’t really any rules,” Patrick says, reassuringly. That was one of the hard parts, for him, that all the rules he’d always followed were taken away, that he had to figure out new ones, that he and David had to write their own. It became one of the best parts, over time. Now, it’s exciting, that he and David can do anything, be anything together, if they choose.

After Gabe’s shift ends at two and he heads home, David comes over to where Patrick is putting out the new throw pillows—the shelf is really high, he should make David do it—and wraps his arms around Patrick from behind, kissing his neck.

“Another successful day of mentoring queer youth, Mr Brewer?” he asks.
“You know, when Gabe’s not in the store, you can call me Patrick. Also when he is in the store. With the things you do to my dick I think we should be on a first name basis.”

David chuckles against his shoulder. “If that’s what you want, Mr Brewer,” he says.

Patrick spins around in his grip and cups David’s face in his hands, making earnest eye contact. “You know you sound like your mother when you call me that, right?” he says, in a low, serious voice.

From the way David freezes, it’s apparent that he did not, in fact, know.

“I—don’t think—no, I don’t,” he says, then screws up his face in annoyance at being so obviously incorrect. “And, and there are worse things than sounding like my mother,” he sputters, eventually.

“As you wish, Mr Rose,” Patrick agrees, moving in to kiss him, managing not to crack a smile. David pulls his face back immediately, horrified.

“Uh, okay, on second thought, let’s maybe go with David,” he says, hastily. Patrick laughs and chases him, kisses him while he’s frowning in disgust.

“It’s not sexy,” David mumbles, from within the kiss. “At all.”

* 

There’s a rehearsal for Cabaret the night before Patrick’s birthday, and since he’s had to miss one or two of them for baseball games, he takes David’s advice and makes sure to show up early, so that Mrs Rose doesn’t think he’s not invested. He ends up arriving early enough that Jocelyn is the only other person there, so he helps her arrange the space.

“Patrick, so glad you were able to clear time in your busy schedule for our modest little production,” Mrs Rose calls out, as she breezes in, five minutes late. “I trust that from now on your extracurricular dance card will be filled with only our name.”

“Well, I still have to play on the baseball team, but I’ll be here for all the rehearsals,” Patrick says. “Jeff and Melissa are going to help cover for me if they need to.”

“Mmm. Very well. Have all of the actors arrived?”

“Just waiting on Stevie,” Patrick says.

When Stevie arrives, Mrs Rose doesn’t call her out for being late; in fact, she’s unusually gentle with her, and Stevie seems to laugh genuinely, even comfortably, at something Mrs Rose says. Patrick wonders what the heck happened at the rehearsals he missed, that those two seem so much closer.

He’ll have to ask her how she got into Mrs Rose’s good graces.

They do some warm-ups, some of them a little silly but mostly fun, some of them things Patrick might swipe for baseball warm-ups. He catches Twyla’s eye a couple of times, and she gives him a reassuring smile that he shoots back at her.

The problem arises, after some movement exercises and character work and discussion of the show as a whole, when Mrs Rose asks him to take them through the opening number.

“To kick us off!” she says. Patrick swallows.

“I’m not, uh. Off-book,” he says. Mrs Rose waves this away.
“That’s fine, dear, just break us into the show. Surely you’re not shy to sing in front of an audience?”

Patrick shakes his head. He’s not; that’s not the issue, really.

He stands up in front of the room, clears his throat, and throws himself into the chorus: *Wilkommen, bienvenue, welcome! Fremde, étranger, stranger!* He doesn’t think his singing’s too bad, but Mrs Rose stops him.

“Allow me to break in there, Patrick, I’m sorry I wasn’t more specific. Give us the movement as well, if you can. I know we haven’t choreographed much yet, but think back to the movement exercise from earlier, and work that exercise into the song. Let yourself move the way your character would move with those lines.”

For her, it’s pretty clear direction, but Patrick’s not sure how to do it. “Um. Okay,” he says.

“Try it like you’re not holding a guitar,” Jocelyn suggests, and Patrick frowns at her.

He tries again, gesturing towards the assembled cast on each *wilkommen*, trying a little back and forth slide of a dance step on *welcome*. He watches Mrs Rose’s eyes get progressively narrower as he goes through it, but she lets him continue the song and the monologue this time.

*Move the way your character would move.* He tries, but he knows he’s not hitting it, and has to concentrate just to keep from going completely still, to keep his hands and feet in some kind of motion. He does belt the song out with some power at the end, so when he finishes, the room smiles and claps. But Mrs Rose looks pensive, and he can see hesitance in Jocelyn’s eyes, too.

“All right!” Jocelyn says. “Thank you, Patrick, for starting us off. Lots to work with there.”

“Mmm,” Moira agrees, thoughtfully. “Let’s take some time in groups and talk about how to craft the atmosphere of a pre-war Berlin cabaret, shall we?”

Patrick’s a little ashamed, like he’s given the class extra work, but no one else seems to notice or mind as they work through the discussion. Maybe it’s what Mrs Rose had planned anyway. Maybe it’s not only because Patrick messed up.

He finds himself in the group with Mrs Rose and Stevie, though, which makes him worry that it’s at least a little bit because he messed up.

Patrick talks, hesitantly, about what he’s learned from researching the time period, the progressiveness of the Weimar era and the backlash against it, and Mrs Rose nods and snaps her fingers.

“Precisely. Yes. The Emcee should embody that. The site of sexual and social transgression, the bleeding edge of the Berlin night culture, the playful joy that is plagued, underneath, with awareness of horrific violence, with deep personal sadness,” she says. Her voice is gentle, but her eyes are sharp.

“Yeah, I’m just not sure how to do that with my arms,” Patrick says, and her expression softens.

“He lives at the boundaries of worlds. He lives where they come together, that’s why he welcomes us in three languages. What is his reaction, to living in those cracks of society?”

Patrick takes a deep breath. “I don’t know,” he confesses.

Mrs Rose’s frown feels like a judgement. “Think about it, dear. I believe there are fathomless depths
Patrick thinks about it. Mrs Rose and Jocelyn bring them back together to work through more of the songs, so he thinks about it while he watches Ronnie take them through a pretty great shrugging rendition of “So What” and Stevie nervously grin her way into “Don’t Tell Mama” with Alexis, Twyla, and the other girls singing backup.

He thinks the answer is: the Emcee lives with as much abandon and joy as he can find, given where and when he’s living. That he tries to live free, but doesn’t, always. That doing so can make him manic and strange and callous and . . . queer.

He’s definitely not sure how to do that with his arms. He thinks he’s let himself in for more than he bargained for. Maybe the guy who’s playing Cliff will want to trade with him.

Afterwards, Patrick walks out with Stevie.

“Feeling overwhelmed?” she asks. Patrick blows out a breath and nods. “That was me, back at the beginning of this.”

Her use of the past tense gives Patrick a sudden spike of hope. “Did you . . . get better?”

She shakes her head firmly. “Nope. But you know what? I’m gonna try this. I normally don’t. Try things. But what the hell. How embarrassing could it be.”

She says it like a statement, like they both definitely already know how embarrassing it could be. Like the answer is, pretty obviously, very.

“You gotta help me out with this, Stevie,” he finds himself saying, begging. “I am not personally ready to represent the bleeding edge of Weimar-era Berlin night culture.”

“You think I’m ready to represent the dark underbelly of self-delusion and desire?” she replies, snorting. It makes Patrick laugh. At least he’s not the only one.

“I guess if you’re doing . . . that, I’ll have to pick up my game and try too,” he says.

Still, he doesn’t think he and Stevie have quite the same problem. Sexual and social transgression, Mrs Rose had said. Well. Who wouldn’t look at him and think that.

*  

On the morning of his birthday, David wakes him up with slow, teasing kisses, a reversal of their usual position.

“Hmm,” Patrick says, smiling as David’s lips work softly over his throat. “What has you up so early?”

“I set an alarm,” David confesses, which explains the odd dream Patrick had, a moment ago, about the bed vibrating. “So I could treat my morning person boyfriend to whatever he wants for his birthday.” He kisses Patrick’s mouth. “Any requests? Bear in mind I’m still three-quarters asleep.”

Patrick glances at the time; it’s six-thirty, the time he normally wakes up, with or without an alarm. David offered to be at the store all day, to give him a day off, so the fact that he got up extra early for this is even more impressive. Patrick tries to think of what he might want David to do to him, to use that time for. His mind flips through the entire repertoire of the sex they’ve had together. He wants all of it, suddenly, everything, all at once. It’s dizzying to think about, the myriad ways in which their
He doesn’t say that, but he takes hold of David’s wrist and brings his hand down to cup his hardening cock. “Oh, hmm. You mean, like, breakfast in bed?”

David kisses his throat, moving his hand lazily, lightly, against Patrick’s dick. “Sure. You want me to make you some eggs?” Another kiss. Patrick laughs, delighted; he’s thirty-three, and happy, and in love for the first time in his life. He’s starting to think, maybe the last time in his life.

“I’d love some . . . oatmeal,” Patrick breathes, sexily, which makes David shake a little with the laughter suppressed behind his pursed lips.

“Oh, hmm. You mean, like, breakfast in bed?”

“It is, be careful not to burn yourself.”

David pushes Patrick’s t-shirt up and kisses down his sternum, giving him little bites and sucking with his lips. “Do you seriously want me to get up and make you some oatmeal? Because I will do that, Patrick. And I should warn you that I’m not very good at it. It could be, like. A fire hazard.”

Patrick does laugh, then, letting his hands rub down David’s shoulders. He’s really, really tempted to see how far David would go with the oatmeal. “You can stay where you are,” he allows. “I like what you’re doing.”

“You like when I go slow with you,” David breathes, happily, nuzzling against the sparse hair above Patrick’s navel, like just knowing this fact is pleasurable to him.

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“Yeah,” Patrick says, swallowing. “Too bad we don’t really have time for you to tie me up.”

David looks up at him. “Wanna do that tonight?” He kisses right beside Patrick’s belly button.

“Okay,” Patrick says. He’s getting hard just thinking about it. “Yeah.”

“Blindfold? Ankle restraints?”

“Sure,” Patrick breathes. “Let’s do the whole thing.”

David lets out a little satisfied grunt, the one he makes when he’s making plans. It’s one of Patrick’s favourite noises. “Think about it, Patrick. Think about how it’s gonna feel, when you can’t move, or see, and just have to enjoy everything I do to you.”

Patrick does think about it, as David starts sucking his cock. He thinks about how he’s felt every time they’ve done that. He’s felt free.

* Patrick spends the morning watching a Jays game he missed the night before, eating a leisurely breakfast, then idly scrolling on his phone for a while. David comes home for lunch with flowers in hand for him, which makes Patrick feel ridiculously warm and special. Patrick told him, once, that no one had ever given him flowers before, and David has apparently taken it upon himself to change that, determinedly bringing him flowers for whatever occasion he could dream up: the anniversary of the store opening, of their second date, of the first time they had sex. Most recently, he bought Patrick flowers in celebration of Canada Day, which Patrick protested as a bit of a reach.

“But you look so cute when you get them,” David explained, and Patrick did something with his
face, and then David said, “Yes, like that,” and Patrick had to kiss him to shut him up.

Now, he can take it in stride, just enjoy them: flowers his boyfriend brought him to make him feel special and loved.

David asks if he’s had any calls, and Patrick tells him about his parents and the weekend getaway they’re on. David seems to be building up to something, though, because he circles around to the other side of the couch, putting space between them, and uses his faux-casual tone.

“Speaking of your parents, I’ve been piecing together that I don’t think I’ve ever spoken to them, outside of work. Is that weird?”

Time stops. Patrick’s skin goes cold. This is it, his opportunity to clear the air with David, to tell him that he’s still not out to his family. Everything inside of him resists it.

“Okay. I’m sure—I’m sure you have,” Patrick says, the first outright lie he’s ever told him. It makes him feel sick to his stomach.

“Yeah. Like, they know about me,” David says, and it’s not even phrased as a question. Patrick knows that, six months ago, it would’ve been, David would’ve asked instead of saying it like he was sure. That Patrick’s made him feel secure, again, and fucked it up, again. Then David adds a soft hesitant “Right?” to the end of it, and Patrick has no words, no plan, no escape route for this. He tells a second lie.

“Of course they know about you, what do you mean? What do you—why—”

He feels even sicker, his skin sweaty and cold at the same time. It’s unsustainable; he can’t do it.

David’s voice gets even higher, even softer. “Like, they know about us, right?”

That question is so direct, so clear, that Patrick can’t bear to lie again, can’t bear to tell himself he’s not already lying in this moment. He wants to leave, to run away, and for a second he does, turning away from David, from David’s question. But then David sits down, nodding to himself, closing his eyes, like this was what he expected the whole time, and Patrick has to come back to him, sit down next to him. Reasons pour out of his mouth, fast, uncensored.

“Okay, listen, David. I’ve—I’ve been wanting to tell them about us, I really have, I just was waiting to do it in person, and then I didn’t go home for the holidays, and then I was feeling so comfortable with you, and your family—”

To his shock, David’s hand comes up to stroke his back as he says this, comforting him.

“Yeah. Yeah, I. I don’t know why I assumed, um. So all this time your parents thought they were just talking to your, your business partner.”

Patrick doesn’t say anything, and David gets the message. Patrick let him talk to his parents, that whole time, without telling him the situation. Without being honest. He had meant to fix it; he had planned to fix it, in September.

“Okay,” David says.

Patrick doesn’t think it is. He gropes for a way to make it clear, to make David see why he’s gotten himself stuck here. Why he wanted to let his parents get to know David first, before telling them.

“David, I know my parents are good people. I just, hm.” His voice starts to crack, and he wants to
cry; he ducks his head, breathes, goes on. “I can’t shake this fear that there’s a small chance that this could change everything, that they might see me differently, or treat me differently.”

“Mm-mnm.” David grabs him up and kisses his temple, more than he deserves, but he can’t help but lean into it.

“I’m gonna deal with this as soon as I see them next, okay?” That’s been the plan, for months: the next time he sees them in person. September. If David needs him to, though, he could do it sooner, could find a reason to drive home: he could make the time. Leave David with the store, and go by himself to . . . do what he’s been putting off for so long.

The idea of it leaves him cold. He can imagine it, has been imagining it for a while now: sitting in his parents’ living room, on the same couch they’ve had since he was a kid, looking at the same wallpaper, and speaking some confession, there in the quiet. The image is horrible. Lonely. Painful. Like returning home to submit himself for an evaluation. Like going back in time, rewinding to who he used to be. He doesn’t want it.

He’ll do it, though. He has to do something. He’ll get in his car, and drive back, and it’ll be like when he drove here in the first place: nervous, afraid, not knowing what’s going to happen next.

“Okay, what you’re dealing with? Is very personal. And it’s something you should only do on your terms. Okay?” Patrick nods. David adds, “That’s why I brought this couple home one day in college and just told my parents to deal with it.”

This gets a chuckle out of Patrick. He can imagine young David doing that. He wonders if he still had an asymmetrical haircut at that age. Patrick wishes he’d had that self-knowledge, that courage. He’s going to fix this now, though. The time for on his own terms is past.

“I’m a take-charge guy, David, I like to take charge of things in my life, you know that.”

“Yep, mm-hmm.” And David pulls away from him, pressing his face against his hands, looking pained.

“You’re upset.” Patrick says, to acknowledge it, at least, the hurt he’s caused. “I would be too.”

“Yeah. Uh. It’s not about that.”

That’s when David explains that this is something he can’t put off until September, can’t plan for, can’t schedule into a trip home: that this is happening now, that his parents are here, now, in town, and about to meet all of Patrick’s friends and all of David’s family and everyone else here who . . . who knows. That, no matter what Patrick does, from here on out, his parents are going to know. Soon. Today.

Cold fear runs through him again, in greater waves than the first time.

But then David offers to be just his business partner, for tonight, and Patrick has to shake his head even as David says the words. That David would be willing to do something so diminisingly selfless, when Patrick hasn’t even been willing to be honest with him, is too much to bear. It’s so sad, it’s so deeply sad, even to think about: pretending he doesn’t love David in front of the whole town. He couldn’t do it, won’t do it.

“I can’t have you do that,” Patrick says. He tries to find the right words to express why: that after everything he’s gained, here, after everything that David’s given him, he has a duty to give back. “I owe it to us to tell them,” he says. “I want them to know.”
He does; he’s been wanting it for a long, long time.

He lets David hold him, and kiss his temple some more, and he holds on too, grateful, anxious, a little relieved. At least David’s in this with him, now. He’d been trying to do it alone, for so long, and it seems ridiculous that he never asked David for help.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he says, closing his eyes, leaning into David’s embrace. Letting himself be comforted. “I wanted to.”

“I know,” David says, and the weird thing is, Patrick’s sure that he does. That he’s seen enough of Patrick, by now, to know this pattern. “I know it’s hard for you, honey.”

“Yeah, but. I’m still sorry,” he says, thinking back on the stories David told him, all the affairs he was roped into and the straight men who made him pretend. “I know you’ve—been the dirty secret, before. I never wanted you to feel that way, with me.”

To his surprise, David laughs softly against his ear. “It’s kind of hard to feel that way when all you ever do is try to drag me out with your friends or out in public to show me off,” he says. “And you willingly spend time with my family. And you get all cute around the mouth when I text Joon-ho or make Jeff and Emily laugh.”

“I don’t get cute around the mouth,” Patrick says, smiling where David can’t see.

“I bet you’re cute around the mouth right now,” David says. Patrick turns to him, still smiling, and meets his eyes. David lifts a hand and rubs his thumb against Patrick’s bottom lip. “See. What did I say.”

“Thank you,” he says, earnestly.

David kisses him, a gentle press of lips. “You wanna practice?”

Patrick blinks at him. “Practice?”

“What you’re gonna say. Like you do. If you want, I’ll help you practice.”

“I don’t—how do you know that I practice what I’m gonna say?”

David raises an eyebrow, like there’s no answer to that, or like the answer is obvious. “You shouldn’t shy away from the classics. ‘Mom, Dad, I’m gay’ may be clichéd, but works perfectly well, or so I’ve been told. My coming out was more about convincing my mom I wasn’t gay, and then convincing my dad that I still liked men and non-binary people and agender people and so on, even though, yes, I also like women.”

“Sounds complicated,” Patrick says. His mind is racing with comparisons: what he’ll have to work to convince his parents of.

David sighs. “It was, at first, a little. It might be, for you. Or not! But you see my parents now. They adore you. They like that I’m with you.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, smiling. It’s been good, having David’s family in his corner. He thinks about Joon-ho’s parents, who rejected the official Presbyterian teachings and accepted him instead, and he thinks about Ben’s parents, who he had to cut out of his life. His parents aren’t like that, though. He doesn’t think he’ll have to cut them out of his life. He hopes not. What if he does?

“Don’t start planning for the worst just yet, is all I’m saying,” David says, interrupting that anxious
thought spiral in its tracks. His hands come to cover Patrick’s hands, where he’s been wringing them pretty hard again, and gently pry them apart, holding them instead. Patrick grips him tight.

“But if I don’t plan for the worst how will I sit here and dwell on terrible things in my mind over and over for hours?” Patrick jokes.

David kisses him. “Um. I—I am gonna have to go back to the store eventually,” he says. “But maybe hanging out here by yourself isn’t the greatest plan?”

“I’ll see if Ray’s around,” Patrick agrees. “He’s distracting.”

David makes a face, acknowledging this. Patrick knows he should let him eat his lunch and get back to work—Stevie’s minding the store right now, which always seems like it should end in disaster even though it never does—but he holds onto him just a little longer.

* *

Ray is busy with photography clients, but he welcomes Patrick in and tells him to help himself to refreshments while he finishes up the session. It’s a couple taking engagement photos, which isn’t surprising, since that’s a good chunk of Ray’s photography business; still, it reminds Patrick of the day he met David, when they shook hands and Patrick made fun of him and David moved his arms and used his voice like there was nothing in the world forbidden to him. Like no one had ever told him he shouldn’t.

He pours himself a glass of juice and finds himself singing “Wilkommen” under his breath. He needs to figure out how to do the song, how to move in the way the Emcee should move. With abandon, and joy, even though he knows about violence. Maybe the choreography will help.

It’s a safe thing to think about, so he lets himself pursue it, humming the song and trying a bigger gesture, a little twirl. He feels stilted. What would the Emcee do with his hips?

“Working on your moves for the show?” Ray says, coming into the kitchen, and Patrick is briefly embarrassed. But he does, after all, have a good excuse.

“There’s a lot to learn,” he says. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“Me either, but it’s fun to learn together,” Ray says. “Too bad we don’t have any songs, you and me, or we could get together for extra practice.”

Patrick nods. “I might ask Stevie to do that, actually, come to think of it.”

They chat about the play for a while, and then Ray tells him the stories he’s been missing, lately, about his weird clients or harebrained new business schemes, and it feels good, like old times. Patrick needs to come over more often. Maybe even drag David here for dinner.

“So, Patrick,” Ray says, after he’s fed Patrick coffee and homemade pie. “A little birdie told me it was your birthday today.”

Patrick smiles. He can imagine that the birdie was David, that David had secretly talked to all his friends to plan him a surprise party. “It is,” he agrees.

“Happy birthday!”

Laughing, Patrick says, “Thank you.”
“I got you a little something,” Ray adds. “I was going to give it to you—uh, well, whenever I saw you next. But since you’re here, why not now?”

“Oh, hey, you didn’t have to do that,” Patrick says. Ray waves this away, jumping up and walking to the other room.

“It was me and Joon-ho, actually. We wanted to! And of course it’s rude to not—I mean, if someone’s having a—well, we weren’t sure if you were doing anything, or if we would be invited, but I thought, we should be prepared—”

Patrick tries hard not to laugh, because it’s pretty clear that Ray is right on the verge of spoiling his surprise party. He resolves to find out when Ray’s birthday is and get him something nice.

He comes back with a huge box, covered with extremely colourful pastel wrapping paper and an obscene number of ribbons. Patrick raises his eyebrows.

“Don’t worry, Patrick, it’s not a big deal, it’s just bulky,” Ray assures him. “Open it!”

Patrick does. Inside is a set of the little basket-shelves that Ray used in his closet upstairs, and a couple other closet organization things—a hanging fabric shoe rack, a set of metal hooks for the wall.

“I thought, for that little step-in closet at your new place,” Ray explains. “Consider it also a late housewarming gift.”

“That’s—so nice, Ray, thank you.” Patrick feels tears welling up in his eyes, looking down at a shoe rack in a box. Ray was the first person he ever came out to, in his life. He blinks the tears away furiously.

“I know you appreciate organization,” Ray says. “Everything neat and tidied away. My new tenant is a very lovely young woman from Elm Valley, such a sweetheart, and, you know, her parents kicked her out, so I’m glad to give her a place to stay. But she is nowhere near as organized as you were.”

Patrick smiles, thinking about another person staying in Ray’s room, another person like the person he used to be, at the beginning of a journey.

“Well. This’ll help me get everything . . . neat and tidy,” Patrick says. “Tidied away.”

*  

He hangs out with Ray until Ray has to run off to show a house, and then he tries to keep busy, keep his thoughts from spiraling out of control. He does some grocery shopping at the co-op, making sure to pick up some of David’s favourite snacks, and he folds his t-shirts, putting them into the wardrobe on the shelf next to David’s shelf full of sweaters, and he dusts the apartment, stopping to look at the framed open mic night poster that David got him for Christmas, at the date on it. They’re coming up on the anniversary of the first time he ever sang for David. Maybe they’ll have to hold an anniversary open mic night. Maybe David will get him flowers.

His cousin Neil texts him happy birthday, with a whole bunch of party popper and balloon emojis.

**Patrick:** Thanks!

**Neil:** I got you a present. It’s the piano part to that song you’re writing

Patrick stares at this for a long minute. He sent Neil some of the arrangements he’d done for covers,
but nothing original. The only original song he’s been working on is that one in E major, and it’s—he wouldn’t—it’s personal.

Patrick: What?

Neil: It was at the end of the scans? It said “add other instrumentation?” at the top, so I thought I’d take a swing at it

Neil sends him a series of photos, and it’s the song Patrick’s been writing, all right. He must’ve sent it by mistake. None of the lyrics are—incriminating. No, that’s the wrong word, a bullshit word. None of the lyrics are obviously gay. But does that even matter anymore? Why is he still thinking about that? His parents are going to know soon. Neil will probably know soon. But still, this song, this song in particular, people from his old life seeing this song, knowing it’s his—his head feels like it’s exploding, like he can’t chase down his thoughts, like they’re escaping him. His fingers move without him even thinking about it, texting back normally even as he freaks out inside.

Patrick: Oh, thanks! I actually didn’t mean to send that. But this is such a cool present. Next time we’re together we can try to play it.

Neil: It’s a really sweet love song. I like it

Patrick: Thanks

Neil: About anyone in particular?

Patrick can’t, won’t, let himself say no, or say something vague. He tells the truth, as much as he can.

Patrick: Yeah

He doesn’t say any more, and Neil, very kindly, doesn’t push.

*  

At the appointed time, he takes a deep breath and walks into the café, and even though he was expecting it, it’s still pretty cool to see all his friends, and David, and David’s family, and . . . and his parents, all in one room, all for him. He really has always wanted this, not so much for the surprise moment, but for the indulgence of it: the idea that someone would care about him enough to do a whole bunch of secret work and careful planning. That a big crowd of people would care about him enough to show up and smile at him and yell surprise really loud.

He had planned to come in and hug David, so he does, in front of his parents. That’s a good first step, and it has the added bonus of being really, really comforting: he basks for a second in the sensations of David’s soft sweater and his familiar shape and his fancy cologne, the one he only wears for special occasions.

He hugs his mom, and then his dad, and their shapes are familiar too; the way it feels to put his arms around them is familiar. He tries to breathe normally.

When David steps back to make room for Patrick and his parents to talk, the panic he’s been pushing down all day starts creeping up on him again.

He can’t get through this on his own. He realizes that, now; he never could. So before he goes to talk to his parents, he says out loud, to David, the thing he’s been keeping buried, the thing that’s been
clawing at his heart from the inside for months now. David already knows it, but Patrick asks it anyway, asks David for reassurance.

“What if they don’t react the way I think they will?”

David gives him the only honest answer he can, steadying hands on his shoulders. “Then I will be here, and we’ll get through it together.”

It’s enough. It’s enough; he thinks it’s enough. It’s a good plan.

“Okay. I love you,” he says, to David, to cement that feeling.

“I love you,” David says back. Patrick takes a breath.

The conversation with his parents passes him by in a feverish blur, his stomach in knots, his hand hurting where he’s pressing into it with his thumb. He doesn’t end up saying I’m gay, like David had suggested, even though it’s what he’s said to everyone else in his life. This moment doesn’t feel like an I moment.

“We’re together,” he says, because that’s really the important part; David’s got sweaters in his wardrobe and snacks in his cupboards and he brought Patrick flowers for his birthday, because he wants Patrick to get to have beautiful things, just for himself, just because he deserves them. “David is my boyfriend. And I’ve never been happier, in my life.”

There’s a rush of relief, just at that, just at saying it, even before they have time to react, and Patrick’s glad he did it, because whatever they say next, the fear of this exact moment will be over.

They say good things: his mom says he’s all that matters to them, and that they want him to be happy, and it’s just the way she used to say it, every time he broke up with Rachel: that’s all we care about. It’s surreal to find that it’s true. His dad says he likes David, I like him a lot, he says, followed up with a gentle remark about David’s clothes, and it finally breaks the tension enough that Patrick feels his eyes well up with tears.

It’s okay; it’s going to be okay. It might be weird. But it’s okay.

When he glances over at the Roses, they’re all pretending not to look, but they’re all also doing a terrible job of pretending not to look. He huffs a laugh, deeply grateful to them, for all the support they’ve given him to get him to this place. He meets David’s gaze, and the look he’s giving Patrick is fortifying, as if David could literally send him strength through the air. He looks back at his parents, who are smiling at him.

“So, is there a—what word should we use, then?” his mom asks, hesitantly. “For you? We weren’t sure, since you and Rachel had, for so many years—”

Patrick cuts her off, shaking his head. “I’m gay,” he says. He guesses there’s no escaping the clichés after all. “I guess I always. Always was.”

“Okay, honey,” his mom says softly.

His dad nods, the way he does when he’s taking in new information, like the little computer in his brain is being updated. “Well,” his dad says, after a pause. He smiles warmly. “Your boyfriend said we should try the crab cakes.”

It’s a lot, to hear that come out of his dad’s mouth, your boyfriend, terrifying and delightful at the same time.
“Let’s go try the crab cakes,” Patrick agrees.

The rest of the party is . . . amazing. He’s never had a party like it before. His mom walks up to David and hugs him, just hugs him, and David looks utterly taken aback for a moment before he hugs her back, wrapping his arms around her delicately, careful not to spill champagne on her cardigan. She leans up and whispers something in David’s ear, and David smiles and smiles and keeps smiling afterwards.

Then his dad hugs David—in that handshake-into-a-backpat guy way, but still—and Patrick finds himself standing with one hand over his mouth while he watches, feeling like he might start crying for real if he doesn’t hold on to his face. David catches his eye, over his dad’s shoulder, and winks.

Instead of crying, Patrick laughs.

“Looks like your parents already love your boyfriend,” Joon-ho says, coming up beside him with two glasses of champagne. Patrick takes one.

“Yeah, it does look like that,” Patrick says.

“Happy birthday, man.”


“I dunno. It’s just nice to see. You give me hope.”

“Shut up,” Patrick says, waving a hand. “You’re the one who does that for me.”

“I am?” Joon-ho shakes his head. “Damn. Why would you listen to me? I’m a mess. Plus I’m too young to be your role model, it’s weird.”

“Okay, okay,” Patrick says, because he feels like a mess himself, his heart and his thoughts pulling in twenty different directions at once, and he doesn’t know how to reassure Joon-ho that he’s doing fine by comparison. “Let’s just call it friendship, then.”

“Deal.” Joon-ho clinks his glass with Patrick’s. Ray comes in then, late, and gives Patrick a quick backslapping hug before he kisses Joon-ho on the cheek.

“You didn’t bring his present?” Joon-ho asks.

“I gave it to him earlier,” Ray protests. Joon-ho rolls his eyes.

“Well, it was from both of us,” Joon-ho says.

“I saw on the card,” Patrick laughs.

Patrick’s mom and dad come over to them, so Patrick introduces them. “Um, Ray, Joon-ho, this is my mom and dad, Marcy and Clint Brewer.”

Ray and Joon-ho are still standing close together, Ray’s arm wrapped around Joon-ho’s waist, Joon-ho’s hand on Ray’s shoulder. It’s unmistakable, what they are to one another.

“Nice to meet you,” Patrick’s dad says, after just a slight pause, and they all shake hands.

Patrick guesses his dad was like him, and had never been in a room with more than two gay people before. It’s okay, he thinks. He’ll get used to it.
Throughout the night, Patrick keeps being delighted by strange combinations of people, his whole life shuffled together and redealt throughout the room: by Jeff and Emily chatting with Alexis and Ted and Victor and Wondo, by Alice and Melissa laughing together with David, by Johnny Rose and Clint Brewer talking animatedly with Maggie and Katherine. Based on the participants and the arm movements, that conversation’s either about baseball or about throwing bricks at cops.

All of his people, all together, in this one place, for him. It’s overwhelming and more than he could’ve imagined for himself. And David did this.

The most interesting grouping, though, that draws his immediate attention, is his mom talking with Mrs Rose and Twyla. For that one, he has to drift a little closer, just to overhear what they might be saying.

“And of course we’ve loved having your dear Patrick in our lives, ever since he and David opened the store together,” Mrs Rose is saying. Patrick’s almost disappointed; that’s pretty tame, for her.

“When they were just business partners,” his mom says.

Mrs Rose looks over her shoulder and catches Patrick’s eye, realizing she’s stepped into a trap. “Um. Yes. Back then.”

“Didn’t they get together pretty soon after the store opening?” Twyla asks, absolutely unaware that there’s a trap nearby and walking blithely into it. “I seem to remember seeing them kiss from across the street, and that was—”

“Yes, yes, how time does fly,” Mrs Rose says, noncommittally. “If you’ll excuse me.” She walks by Patrick as she leaves the group, touching his arm and mouthing a rueful sorry at him. He sighs and pats her passing hand in forgiveness.

His mom looks over at him, brow furrowed, anxious. He’s spent so much of his life just trying to make that line between her eyebrows go away. She never asked him to, but he did. He steps up towards them.

“You’re remembering right, Twyla. David and I had our first date on his birthday last year.” It’s easier to say than the first thing was, the David is my boyfriend thing. Patrick hopes the things he has to say keep getting easier.

“When’s David’s birthday?” his mom asks, clearly wanting to puzzle it out. When Patrick hesitates, just for a moment, she adds, awkwardly but genuinely, “We should . . . put it in the family calendar.”

Patrick wants to hug her. He swallows and says, “David’s birthday is about a month before mine. I’m sure he’d love to see it on next year’s calendar.”

She nods, slowly, a little sadly, recognizing how long he waited to tell them. Maybe recognizing that he would’ve gone on waiting, probably, for even longer, if they hadn’t shown up in town.

“Well. Happy late anniversary, then,” his mom says, eventually. Patrick gives in to the urge and hugs her.

“Thanks, mom,” he says, against her shoulder.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Patrick doesn’t know what she’s apologizing for, specifically, but he thinks he gets it. Maybe it isn’t anything specific. Maybe it’s just all the years that rolled by without them giving him the choice, all the years of stacked up assumptions. “I’m sorry we didn’t make it easier.”
“It’s okay,” he says, and holds her tighter. It’s weird to find that it is, actually, okay, that he feels okay about it. He thinks back to what Jeff said, about changing who you were in high school. This is the path that got him here, and he likes where he is.

She sighs against his shoulder, and he closes his eyes. He’s missed her.

When they pull apart, his mom wipes an eye surreptitiously. Patrick pretends not to see. The line between her eyebrows is still there. He tries to tell himself that he doesn’t have to fix it, this time.

“I’ll have to take you by the store tomorrow,” he says, instead, changing the subject. “We can get you a basket of stuff to take home with you.”

“Oh, I would love to see the store,” his mom smiles. “Though David did already bring us that basket earlier today. Pity about the body milk being out.”

“He . . . brought you a basket?”

“Yes, to the motel. He’s such a sweetheart, dear. He—it’s clear he really—cares for you.”

Patrick’s mind spins, putting the pieces together. “Yeah,” he says. “He does.”

When the dancing starts, Patrick notices with bemusement that most of the couples are queer: Maggie and Katherine, Ray and Joon-ho, Alice and Hannah, Derrick and Steven, Jeff and Emily. Even Scout is dancing with Candice’s daughter Helena, holding hands and twirling around in somber parody of the grownups. He smiles, watching it, then darts his eyes over to his parents, who are watching with similar bemusement and a lot more surprise.

*These are my people now,* he thinks. *Family, meet family.* He doesn’t even hesitate before he holds his hand out to David.

Somehow, with everything else they’ve shared, they’ve never done this before. But David smiles as he takes his hand, grip firm and sure. Patrick twirls him into his arms and puts a hand at the small of his back, keeping their other hands clasped together. David’s free hand settles on his shoulder. Patrick realizes, a moment later, that he’s just taken the lead without asking.

“Sorry, I—” he lifts his hand an inch or two away from David’s back, a little unsure. “Do you want to lead?”

David comes in close, kisses his cheek. Patrick blushes, wondering if his parents are watching, are seeing. He wills himself not to look. “It’s fine. I can be the femme one in front of your family.”

Patrick narrows his eyes, pushes him away a step, then comes back in, guiding David’s hand to his back, putting his hand on David’s shoulder.

David groans. “You’re impossible. I can’t believe you have to be competitive about this too,” he says, shaking his head emphatically in annoyance. “Do you even know how to dance this way?”

“I learned all the other kinds of dancing that you showed me,” Patrick says, grinning, and this time David’s the one blushing.

“Well, you’re lucky I’m a switch on the dance floor, too,” David mutters. Patrick laughs, helplessly, and buries his face against David’s shoulder, forgetting to care about what it looks like, about what men do or what women do, just doing what feels good, what his body wants to do with David’s body.
David holds him, holds him up.

*

David tells him that the invitation specifically requested no gifts, but there are a few anyway, in addition to the one from Ray and Joon-ho: a new board game from Jeff, Emily, and Scout; a book on the history of the Broadway musical from Twyla; a very tiny bottle of cologne from Alexis, with the annoyed disclaimer that “David didn’t give us much time to shop.”

“Ugh, Alexis, did you regift this from Ted?” David protests, voice going high.

“Well, tell us in advance, next time, David!” Alexis grits out.

Patrick stands between them and calmly holds the bottle up, spraying into the air for David to sniff. “Thoughts?”

They both stop arguing.

“Actually, okay, that would be gorgeous on you,” David admits, after a moment.

“Hmph,” Alexis says, stomping one foot with a little grin. “See.”

“Did it work on Ted?” David asks, pointedly.

“No,” Alexis replies, petting her hair like a defense mechanism. “And I admit I should’ve asked your opinion before buying it.”

“Thank you,” David says, mollified. He sniffs the air again, then glances thoughtfully at Patrick. Patrick resolves to wear it at the next sexiest opportunity.

His parents give him an absolutely beautiful leather portfolio, which he doesn’t really need since David got him a new one for their anniversary, but it is very thoughtful.

“That’s such a lovely design,” David says, touching it admiringly, making Patrick’s parents smile in relief.

Patrick didn’t know he had this capacity for love, this much room in his heart for so many people. He didn’t know. He says thank you a lot.

“Where’s mine from you?” he demands, when David doesn’t immediately fork over a present.

“At your place,” David replies, promptly. “But here’s a taste.” He pulls out a little wrapped box, jewelry-box sized, and it makes Patrick think wildly of engagement rings. But inside is a double-loop leather bracelet with a silver clasp and little silver rivets. It’s delicate, pretty and masculine at the same time, but not at all something that David would wear. He realizes, suddenly, that it’s something he would wear, that it suits his sense of style even though he’s never worn a bracelet in his life.

“I . . . love it,” Patrick says, slowly. David puts it on him, clicking the clasp together, and Patrick feels himself getting hot under the collar in a very familiar way. “Wait, does this mean— the rest at home is—”

“Yup,” David says.

“ Took you long enough,” Patrick says, breathlessly.

“I told you. I had to wait for coupons and deals. In order to budget responsibly.”
“I love you,” Patrick says, fervently, and kisses him, soft and slow. He only remembers afterwards that his parents can see them.

*

Later, when all the guests have gone home and it’s just the two of them dancing, he gets David to admit to what had really been going on, his parents knowing about their relationship in advance of the party, the gift basket David took them as an excuse to talk to them about it. He pays attention to David’s reaction, watches his mouth purse in anxiety and feels his hands flutter with reassurance on his shoulders.

In that moment, Patrick decides to marry him.

It’s not a big realization or anything, just something he’s been thinking he should get around to for a while now. It’s been on his mental list, right after “come out to parents,” and because he got stuck on the first one, he wasn’t letting himself think about the second one as much as he wanted to.

There’s nothing in the way, anymore, and in the wake of that relief he starts making plans. He’ll drive to that specialty jeweler out past Elm Valley on his next day off. He’ll get some of that good champagne that David likes, that they carry in the Elmdale LCBO but not here. There are steps to take. He’ll take them.

“You made everything all right, David,” he says.

*

Patrick takes David back to his place after the party, holding his hand on the way up the stairs, not saying very much. He feels slow, pensive, lost in thinking and rethinking everything that’s happened over the course of the day.

“You okay?” David asks, when they get inside and close the door.

Patrick nods, turning his back to David, putting down his keys and wallet, setting his shoes on the rack. “Just a little drained, I guess.”

“It was a lot, today,” David agrees. When Patrick turns back around, he’s still by the door, overnight bag in his hand. Patrick walks over to him, and David sets down the bag, and Patrick fits himself inside the warm circle of his arms for a hug. He breathes out, letting the tension of the day finally release.

“I know we said we were gonna do fancy sex things tonight,” David murmurs, into his ear, “but if you’re too tired we can just sleep.”

Their conversation from that morning seems so long ago, now. They had talked about David tying him up, but Patrick’s already spent the day feeling raw and exposed; he doesn’t think he could handle the vulnerability that the bondage brings out of him. He wants something else, right now. He wants to be covered.

Patrick looks up at him. “Are you trying to get out of giving me the rest of my present?” he asks.

“Please, I have been dying to give you your present for weeks. I had to give parts of it to Stevie for safekeeping so that I wouldn’t cave and give it to you early.”

Patrick pecks him on the lips. “Then let’s do that, at least. I don’t know if—if I’m up for much else. But I want to see what you got me.”
“All right,” David says, huskily. “Will you get undressed, and get on the bed?”

“I will,” Patrick says. While he does that, David gathers items from the back of his cupboard in the wardrobe. So sneaky; Patrick didn’t know he was hiding anything in there. He didn’t know there was room amid David’s sweaters to hide anything in there.

“Not the bracelet, but everything else,” David says, over his shoulder, when Patrick’s down to his underwear. Patrick shivers at the idea of being naked except for that one piece of jewelry. He rubs at it, pressing it against the skin of his wrist.

Pulling off his boxer-briefs and tossing them into the laundry, Patrick lounges back on his elbows, naked, hoping he doesn’t look too ridiculous.

David comes and kneels on the rug at his feet, his eyes dark and appreciative as they rake over his body, so, maybe he’s doing okay. He sets a stack of clothing on the bed next to Patrick, then ignores it completely to run his palms up Patrick’s thighs, spread his hands over Patrick’s ribs, and lean up to kiss him. Patrick takes his head in his hands and kisses back.

“You know, most people would dream of having their boyfriend undress them as part of their birthday celebrations,” Patrick says, quirking a smile, cupping David’s face. David turns to nuzzle his cheek against Patrick’s hands.

“Maybe most people need more of an imagination,” David suggests, twisting his lips. Patrick grins.

“Have you done this before?” he asks, before he can stop himself. It’s a question he tries not to ask David, when they’re doing something sexy, or even something romantic. It’s not how he wants to approach their relationship, usually, and he doesn’t want to remind David of bad past experiences, either. He swallows and tries to soften the question with a joke. “Shared your encyclopedic knowledge of designer fashion?”

David dodges the question altogether. “Mmm, unfortunately, and not to kill the mood, not all of the pieces here are designer. Though I did make a wish-list version of this outfit first, before figuring out how to do it on a budget.”

“Oooh,” Patrick says. “Tell me more about your budgeting techniques. How much did the wish-list version cost?”

“Fifteen thousand dollars,” David says, offhandedly, leaning up to kiss his throat. “You would’ve been so expensive.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to move for fear of damaging something.”

“Just as well, then. I don’t want you to feel afraid. Come here, honey.”

He takes what look like normal boxer-briefs off the top of the pile, deep navy blue and black, and Patrick obediently lifts one foot, then the other, letting David slide them up his legs.

Patrick lifts his hips up off the bed. David settles them in place. They feel nice, soft, though they’re—smaller than what he’s used to. They cling.

“Not hiding anything in these,” Patrick points out.

“These are actually the real thing. Hanro. Flat seams. Microfiber.” David’s fingertips run up the lines of stitching, over the edges where the fabric cups his dick. He’s still soft, but he’s not going to stay like that for long, with David doing this. “Look at how pretty your cock looks in these.”
“Yeah,” Patrick says, shifting his thighs a little, restless. “They’re—really tight. And soft.” They kind of cradle his dick, and it’s—okay, Patrick can see why people might pay for this experience, to have this all day, every day. His cock does look pretty.

“You’re not allowed to come in them,” David says, kissing Patrick’s belly wetly, just above the waistband.

“Noted,” Patrick laughs. “Maybe stop licking me, then.”

David moves on to the next piece, a tan-coloured long-sleeved . . . shirt? Sweater? He kneels up to pull it over Patrick’s head, then kisses his mouth.

“To answer your question, no.”

“No?”

“No, I’ve never done this for anyone else. Arms up.”

Patrick raises his arms and David catches his wrists, slowly guiding each hand into the sweater and through the arm.

“Do you like it? Doing it with me?”

“It makes me fucking wild,” David says, immediately, softly. “You have no idea how—it makes me lose it. Patrick. I never.” David blows out a breath and then lifts his eyes to meet Patrick’s. “I never loved anyone else nearly enough to do this for them.”

“Oh,” Patrick says, and he feels it, then, in the touch of the fabric to his skin, how much of David’s love went into this. How much of his time, and thought, and attention. “Thank you.”

He pulls the sweater slowly down Patrick’s torso, smoothing his hands over it as he goes, then moving up against him to smooth the fabric at his shoulders, down his sleeves. The sweater clings, too, like the boxer-briefs, tight across his shoulders and arms, across his belly. “It makes me feel all kinds of inappropriately possessive things,” David says, hands on Patrick’s chest, “seeing you in clothes I picked out.”

“I like it too,” Patrick breathes. “I love it. It’s like being covered in you. Surrounded by you.”

David meets his eyes, gaze sharp. “Yeah,” he says. “Like, if people saw you in this—”

“When people see me in this,” Patrick corrects him.

“When, when people see you in this, they’ll know I dressed you. That you let me. That you’re my boyfriend.”

“David,” Patrick says, moved and turned on all at the same time. “They know anyway. I can’t hide it. Doesn’t matter what I’m wearing.”

“Okay,” David says, hoarsely. Patrick clenches his jaw, frustrated, wishing he could express the entirety of the feeling, the scale of it. After today, after months of edging around a lie, he wants to make sure that David understands this fundamental truth.

“I want everyone to know. I always did. I was scared, but I wanted it so badly. Remember the first place I ever kissed you?”

David looks puzzled. “In your car?”
“That’s the first place you ever kissed me.”

“Oh,” David says, softly, obviously remembering their first kiss in the store. “I did wonder. At the
time, You moved to PDAs kind of. Kind of fast.”

Patrick runs a hand through David’s hair, just above his ear, then moves down to thumb along his
jawline. He didn’t know it then, but he knows now that David was fundamentally shorted on PDAs
in his previous dating life. They had fit together so well, and not even known it. “And now? Do you
still wonder?”

“No,” David says. “Not anymore.”

“I want everyone to know how lucky I am,” Patrick says, to drive the point home.

David smiles up at him. Patrick smiles, too, smiles as David lightly picks up his foot by the ankle, as
David kisses the instep, as David slides a light grey sock over his foot and up his leg.

God, he’s getting hard. He’s gonna start leaking into these fancy underwear, but he has to assume
David planned for that. Right? Surely the underwear are machine-washable, at least. David’s touch
on his leg, on his ankle, is electric, for all that it’s simple and practical. David’s not trying to make it
sexy, but it is, it is. Just the fact of him doing this is sexy.

That contrast makes Patrick want to speak more truth, to give David more. He strokes his hands
through David’s hair some more, gently, to give them something to do.

“I used to think—back then, when we were first starting out. I used to think I was becoming a new
person. New Patrick. I felt so many new things. Like the way I felt when I first kissed you in the
store, where anyone could see. Like I was a whole new person.”

David repeats the same series of motions with his other foot: lift, kiss, clothe. Patrick’s skin
disappears beneath the finely-woven fabric. His desire ratchets up with the sensation of David’s
fingertips tickling against the hairs on his leg.

“And now?” David asks. “Stand up.”

Patrick stands, lets David slide a pair of light grey trousers up over his legs, over his half-hard cock,
heavy in the soft boxer-briefs.

“Now, I don’t know,” Patrick breathes, watching David stick out his tongue in concentration as he
does up the button and zipper on the trousers. He lets his hands fall to David’s shoulders, then come
up to cradle his face. David looks up at him. “Maybe part of me is still the old Patrick, after all.
Maybe not. I’m still figuring it out.”

David’s pulling at the sweater, tugging it down to sit correctly over the trousers; it’s a lot longer than
what Patrick would normally wear.

“I’m surprised you didn’t get me skinny jeans,” Patrick says. “You talk enough about how much you
wish I’d wear something tighter.”

“It was an unholy decision that I was called upon to make,” David agrees, softly. He stands, not too
close, lightly cupping Patrick’s elbows and leaning in to cross the distance and kiss him. “Come on.”

David leads him to the bathroom mirror, and Patrick’s a little stunned; the sweater emphasizes the
breadth of his shoulders and the narrowness of his waist, and the line of the trousers makes his ass
and legs look good, even though they’re not that tight. It’s professional, is the funny thing, and
dressed up, but in a way he would never have picked out for himself.

He realizes that David disappeared back into the apartment only when he comes back, holding a dark blue and white bomber jacket. Patrick blinks and raises his arms for it. David slides it on his shoulders, then kisses his neck from behind. Patrick twists and turns a little, looking at as much as he can see in the small mirror. It’s like David’s given him another version of himself, this outfit that rides the line between professional and sporty, that’s all the warm neutrals that David would never wear himself.

“I’ll take any Patrick you want to give me,” David says, quietly. “Whichever Patrick you decide you want to be that day. I’ll love every one of them.”

“Yes?” He meets David’s eyes in the mirror, breathless. He thinks about all the Patricks that are out there, the new ones and old ones and the ones he can’t imagine yet, the ones he might want to try out sometime in the future.

“Yeah. Though this particular version looks really hot right now.” He kisses Patrick’s neck again, on the other side this time.

Patrick spins around, meeting David’s mouth with his. “This is a nice birthday present,” he says.

David raises one of Patrick’s hands, pushing back the sleeves, and reveals the bracelet he gave him earlier that night. Eyes locked with Patrick’s, he presses a kiss to his wrist, below the two loops of leather.

“I’m glad you got to try some new things today,” he says.

“One way to put it,” Patrick says, gently pushing David back, out of the bathroom, back towards the bed on the other side of the apartment. “Will you get on the bed for me?”

“Will you make me?” David shoots back.

He grins as Patrick pushes him down, then frowns as Patrick kneels in front of him.

“Not really good for the fabric,” he says, as Patrick pushes his thighs apart and muscles his way between them. He shucks off the jacket and tosses it lightly on the bed behind David, then pushes up his sleeves. His new bracelet stands out against his wrist.

“Yeah? What about the sight of me wearing these clothes, between your legs, sucking your cock?” He opens David’s pants with a quick practiced movement and drags them roughly down his hips. “Is that good for anything?”

David’s dick is hot, getting hard, pressing eagerly into Patrick’s hand. “Ungh. It’s—yeah. It’s good. Just.” He bends forward and undoes Patrick’s grey trousers, pushing the boxer-briefs down just past his dick, the elastic resting against Patrick’s balls. “Wanna see you,” he says. Patrick closes his eyes briefly as David’s hand gives him a couple of firm strokes, getting him all the way hard.

“You just don’t want me to come in my new pants,” Patrick laughs, breathless, and sucks the head of David’s cock, leisurely, softly, just to tease him. They both love it when he does it this way. Patrick wants the noises David makes when he does it this way.

“Yeah,” David says, falling back onto his elbows. “That too. Handwash only. The sweater can go in the machine.” His hand comes up to card through Patrick’s hair. “You know you’re supposed to be the one getting blowjobs on your birthday, not giving them.”
Patrick pulls off, slowly, rubbing and kissing David’s slit with his lips as he goes. David makes a gratifying little moan. “My birthday. I get to do what I like best.”

“Well, by all means,” David says.

Patrick takes David inside, because it’s a thing he likes, a part of who he is now, something he never knew until recently but that he’s happy about today, on his birthday, when he gets to feel entirely like himself.

The next day is a Monday, so he and David spend it with his parents, which is . . . surreal, in a good way. Patrick doesn’t wear his new outfit, but he does wear his fancy shoes, and the new bracelet, along with a henley and jeans, and it means that David keeps giving him hot glances and staring at his wrist while Patrick’s trying to talk to his family.

He doesn’t mind.

His parents exclaim over the store, and the summer series of events they’ve been running, and even though David gave them a bunch of stuff the day before, they buy things they definitely don’t need, just for the sake of it. It reminds Patrick of the time when he was in grade four and his dad bought five magazine subscriptions just so Patrick would have something to show for the endless fruitless hours of doorknocking he’d done.

He tells that story to David, while his parents browse, and it makes his dad look up from the stationery supplies, amused. “It’s not a crime to want to support our son,” he says. “And anyway, you were pretty upset about those magazine subscriptions. I remember you stomped around all day talking about how rude the neighbours were and how it was for a good cause.”

David suppresses a smile at that, maybe feeling some small payback for all the times his parents were embarrassing in front of Patrick.

“Plus we can give some of this as presents to your cousins and your aunts and uncle,” his mom adds, bringing more stuff to the front.

It’s a reminder that coming out to his parents was one thing, but that there are a ton of other people who he’d also better come out to, before his parents get back home. He suspects some of them might not react as well as his parents did. But it’s not as terrifying now, as it was. He’ll ask David for help. They’ll get through it together.

The four of them do other local stuff: a nature walk, on flat ground for the sake of his mom’s knees, a tour and a tasting at a couple of the farms they source from for the store. Patrick’s dad notices when their vendors come out to greet David, obviously happy to see him, notices the way David’s good at those business relationships. He raises his eyebrows at Patrick and smiles, and the surge of pride that flows through him in that moment is ridiculous, for what it is. It’s ridiculous, but Patrick likes it anyway.

“He is a great partner in business,” his dad jokes, and Patrick laughs.

“Yeah. That too,” Patrick agrees.

They go to dinner together, at the end of the day, out to the winery at Stonebrook Farms. David had originally made a reservation for three, just for Patrick and his parents. Patrick called Marianne and changed it to four.
“David and I had our second date here,” Patrick says as they drive up to the main house, working around the shy, fearful lump of concrete in his chest, chipping away at it.

“It’s beautiful,” his mom says, sounding touched.

His parents ask them questions while they eat, mostly about the store but about other things too, their friends, what they like to do together. Patrick tells them about games night and skating in the winter, about the disastrous tree walk with Alexis and Ted, about romcoms at the drive-in movie theatre and the day David took Patrick’s baseball team to victory. They’re all the stories he wanted to tell them before, the halves and parts of stories he’d lopped off when he talked to them, and it feels good to finally make them whole again.

David joins in, so that they end up passing stories back and forth between them, interrupting and contradicting and finishing each other’s sentences. Patrick doesn’t really think too much about it—it’s how they talk together when they’re hanging out with friends, or with David’s family—but halfway through the story about the time Mrs Rose thought she was going to be implicated in a murder, he glances up to see his dad looking at him with the fondest, most amused expression, and he realizes how he and David look, to him.

His dad smiles, softly. Patrick ducks his head for a second, shy, but he keeps talking.

Later, when he and David drop them off at the motel, his dad wraps him up in a tight hug.

“I’ve never seen you like this before,” he says, simply. “It’s good to see.”

*  

“So?” David asks, the next day, after his parents have gotten on the road and they’ve opened the store. “Are you gonna call the aunts and the cousins? The mean uncle?”

Patrick’s kind of touched that David remembered that, that David has been thinking about that. At the same time, he’s deeply annoyed that he brought it up. It’s yet another item that has to get checked off before he can propose, though. And he really, really wants to propose, now that he’s allowed himself to think about it seriously.

“God,” he groans. “It doesn’t end.”

“We could get you a little rainbow face tattoo,” David says, laughing. Then he stops laughing and says, “That’s a joke, that’s not allowed.”

“Oh, so you get veto power over my face tattoos now, is that it?”

“If you want me to kiss your face ever again, then yes, that is it.”

Patrick chuckles. “Fair.” He thinks about it some more. “Well, too bad, because that’s the only way to make it stop, I think. No one’s ever gonna . . . clock me at the grocery store. Not for sure.”

He’s had a couple of those conversations already, with people from out-of-town baseball teams or while he’s shopping in Elmdale, with customers in the store who don’t already know him or David. Those do you have a girlfriend? conversations that prompt the need to choose between saying no or I’m seeing someone or I have a boyfriend. Patrick’s never come out of the other end of one of those conversations feeling like he’s said the right thing, and he’s also never come out of one of those conversations feeling like the other person was comfortable with the interaction. They’re always frustrating, and always make him angry in a weird, freefloating way.
David shrugs. “Unless you’re holding my hand at the grocery store. But that’s okay. You don’t have to—be clockable.”

“Yeah.” David’s clockable, is the thing. He gets clocked. As some kind of queer, anyway. Maybe it annoys him to be clocked as gay; Patrick doesn’t know. Maybe it’s all bad.

“And you don’t have to tell the rest of your family, either. You could let it filter through your parents. Or let them come visit you yourselves, if they want to know.”

Patrick smiles. “I could just be a bespoke gay. Coming out scenes by appointment only.”

David huffs a laugh. “You know I won’t argue with such an exclusive arrangement.”

In the end, Patrick figures this is what social media is for, if it’s for anything, and makes his relationship status visible to everyone. Then he ropes David into taking a bunch of selfies with him, which requires a bit of convincing, and lets David frown at his phone for forty minutes while he chooses the one picture to not delete.

“There,” he says. “We look cute in this one.” It’s one where Patrick is kissing David’s cheek while David raises an eyebrow at the camera.

Patrick agrees, but he thinks they looked cute in all of them, even the ones where David’s eyes were closed. He makes his first post in over a year, writing: Work is more fun when you do it with someone you love.

“Ugh,” David says, when he reads it. “Okay. Whatever. Remember you can turn off notifications so you don’t have to deal with any comments.”

“I know,” Patrick says, but doesn’t.

Most of his family leave sweet, supportive stuff. Some of them very conspicuously say nothing, which is . . . hard to take.

Neil leaves a comment that says Oh, so that’s who the song’s about! which makes Patrick blush and smile, heart beating fast with a giddy, out of body joy. He replies with a simple Yup and Neil gives him a series of different coloured heart emojis that make a rainbow.

The heart emojis make him wonder. Thinking back, he realizes he’s never actually been sure about cousin Neil. Maybe they’ll chat, next time Patrick’s home.

There’s a comment from Amanda Clarkson, who he used to know on student council in high school; it’s just a wink emoji. Patrick grins and goes to her page. It turns out that she and her two girlfriends are expecting a baby.

Below Amanda’s wink, Patrick’s shocked to see that Rachel’s left a comment that says Really happy for you. Patrick shows David, who smiles at it, then gets his suspicious face.

“Wait, so, I’m just realizing that this means she knew, but she didn’t tell anyone in your hometown? For months?”

“She said she wouldn’t. When she was here. I knew she wouldn’t break her promise.”

“She must really have—wow.”

David closes his mouth and stops talking, like he’s afraid that opening his lips even a little will let out
“words that he doesn’t want to say.

“What?” Patrick asks, not able to bear not knowing. “You can say it.”

“She must really have loved you,” David sighs, softly.

“Yeah.” Patrick agrees, feeling the weight of it. “She did.”

“Should we send her, like, a gift basket or something?”

“Maybe I’ll just say thank you,” Patrick says, not at all sure what the general etiquette is for your current boyfriend sending your ex-girlfriend skincare products, but sure that in this situation in particular it would be weird. He kisses David on the jaw. “You can’t solve all emotions with gift baskets.”

“Okay, but some of them, though,” David protests.

As a result of that post, Patrick chats with a few of his friends and family members from back home, people he hasn’t talked to in a while. His old friend Mike gets in touch, and tells him about this year’s colts. Sherry, who he dated when they were in university, tells him she’s bisexual. His cousin Hallie sends him pictures of the new service dog eating ice cream. Life goes on.

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“Hey, Gabe,” Patrick says, while he’s counting the float and Gabe’s sweeping the floor. “You worked the wine tasting event with David last week, right?”

Gabe stops sweeping and looks up at him. “Yes? You paid me for it.”

“How did it go?”

He shrugs. “Lots of people in the store, a bunch of them bought wine. You saw the day’s receipts, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Patrick agrees. “I want your opinion.”

Gabe leans the broom against the central table and walks over to the counter. “You do?”

Patrick glances up from the fistful of smudgy loonies in his hand. “Yeah.”

It takes Gabe a few seconds to reply, but when he does, it’s with confidence. “It was good. There was like. A mix of ages. And backgrounds. Some of the events here don’t get that, I think you had some new people in. And there was an obvious product to sell, that was connected to it, which meant sales were really good compared to, say, an open mic night, no offense.”

“None taken,” Patrick says, feeling a smile creep over his face.

“You guys should start carrying stuff related to open mic night, by the way.”

“What, like, guitars? A karaoke machine?” Patrick’s thought of this himself, but hasn’t had good ideas for marketable items.

“Put out the journals and fancy pens and stuff in a display that says they’re for poetry writing. Or music writing,” Gabe says, immediately. “Skincare and makeup into a display for making yourself look good on Instagram or YouTube.”

“Marianne was really nice, but kind of overwhelmed. She needs like, another person with her to do it. The snacks were good. A bunch of people asked about corkscrews, which we don’t sell for some reason.”

“Hmm.” Patrick had asked David about the wine tasting event, and he had touched on almost all of the same points. David is already working with local vendors to find someone who can make or supply corkscrews. It’s not like every last thing in the store is 100% locally made—the toilet plungers being a case in point—but David wants to keep things on brand as much as possible, and Patrick agrees.

“Why are you asking me?”

Patrick shrugs. “I wasn’t there.”

Gabe’s smile is sly. “Mr Rose said you were a morning person, and that I should get used to working more of the nighttime events.”

“Did he,” Patrick laughs. “You know, now I think about it, I do recall you worked not only the last open mic night, but also the writer’s workshop before that. And the scrapbooking thing. That’s a lot of nights off for me or for David.”

“Yeah. I like the events. They’re fun.”

Patrick nods, slowly, making up his mind. “You wanna design one?”

Gabe blinks at him a bunch, then looks terrified, then looks excited, then blinks some more. It’s exactly what David means when he uses the phrase face journey.

“There are a couple coming up that you could take over,” Patrick says, since Gabe seems to be stuck in the rough for the moment. “I know you’ll be busy once school starts again, but you can do it in the afternoons and on the weekends. There’s the local photographers get-together in September. Then next open mic night, I’m thinking late September for that, you already have experience with those, you could do it on your own. There’s a Fruits of the Harvest Thanksgiving thing David’s running in October, I’m not sure what that actually is but he seems to have an idea, you could work with him. And I was thinking about holding some kind of LGBTQ2AIP-plus event in the fall sometime, but I haven’t nailed it down. I’d probably help you with that one, since we haven’t run it before.”

“I—wow,” Gabe says. “So, do I get paid extra for this? The . . . planning stuff?”

Patrick smirks, proud of him. “Time and a half, up to a prenegotiated number of hours.”

“All right.” Gabe’s grin is taking up his entire face, now. “So—um, do I have to pick now, or.”

“End of the week. Want me to write them down for you?”

“Yes, please,” Gabe says.

Patrick sends him home with the list of choices tucked in his hand. Then he finishes sweeping the floors, because Gabe, in his excitement, forgot entirely.

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“If I do the, uh. LGBT one,” Gabe says, a few days later, the next day he’s working with Patrick. “Do I have to like. Speak at it, or stuff like that?”

“Nope,” Patrick says, feeling like his heart’s gonna beat right out of his chest. “I’ll do the talking.”


Patrick swallows hard. “Good,” he says. “We’ll schedule a meeting to start talking through ideas. I’d like it to be friendly and welcoming for the young people around here, especially. Start thinking about how to do that.”

“Okay,” Gabe says again. A customer comes in, just then, and Gabe helps him, showing him the wood-carved fountain pens, explaining how they work. He’s attentive and knowledgeable, thanks to David’s lessons on product details and Patrick’s lessons on not overwhelming customers with product details.

“Find everything you wanted?” Patrick asks the customer, when he brings the pen set up to the counter.

“Yeah. I heard this place was great, but, it’s really amazing,” he says, shooting a glance at Gabe, who’s restocking with another pen set from the back.

“Glad you think so,” Patrick says.

When the customer’s gone, Gabe comes back up to the counter.

“You want me to get started cleaning the bathroom?” he asks.

“Good idea. Finish restocking the lotion first, though.”

Gabe nods, but doesn’t move towards the back room.

“Something else?” Patrick asks. Gabe frowns and ducks his head, and Patrick feels his chest go tight, so his breathing doesn’t work quite as well. He tries not to let it show.

“You know why I picked that event, right,” he says, in a low voice. “Like. You know.”

“I . . . had a general idea,” Patrick says, delicately, feeling his way through it. He hopes to hell he doesn’t fuck this up. “Wasn’t gonna presume.”

“Well. You can presume.” Then a little grin, and Patrick grins back.

“Check,” he says. “Should I presume any letter in particular, or . . . ?”

Gabe shakes his head. “I don’t—I’m still. Working on that.”

Patrick nods. He wonders if he should like. Touch him? Hug him? Put an avuncular hand on his shoulder? He decides against it. He’s still the kid’s boss.

“Well,” he says instead. “Whatever you want. If you wanna talk about it, or—” Patrick flips anxiously through the acronym letters in his head, “—if you want different pronouns, or anything. Let me know.”

“Ohkay,” Gabe says, that small grin breaking over his face again. He heads back towards the bathroom.

“Sorry, Mr Brewer,” he says.

“Coming out to me doesn’t mean you get to shirk your responsibilities,” Patrick says, severely, which only makes him grin more.

“Think I should try it on Mr Rose, instead?”

Patrick cocks his head, trying to puzzle through whether that would actually work. David hates other peoples’ emotional baggage, but Patrick’s not sure if Gabe is still in the category of other people, for David. Also, he loves being trusted with secrets.

“I’d give you a fifty-fifty chance of success on that. Up to you if you’re willing to risk the consequences of the wrong fifty.”

“I might take that chance,” Gabe says, and Patrick recognizes that feeling, right down deep in his bones, that giddy feeling of being suddenly, gloriously, allowed. Come out to David, kid, Patrick thinks. Come out to as many people as you want to.

“Let me know how it goes,” Patrick says, trying not to smile too hard.

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The summer deepens, and the LGBTQ2AI-plus night hosting duties cycle around again, so it’s back at Ronnie and Karen’s house for the first time since Patrick first went. He hasn’t been to their house at all, lately; during the whole bathroom thing and the baseball rivalry, there’d been a cooling off period between them, and games nights and bowling had broken up into smaller groups.

Ronnie welcomes him with a nod.

“Patrick,” she says.

“Ronnie,” Patrick replies. “Thanks for having me.”

“All are welcome,” she replies.

“You know, that was the banner above my church door, when I was a kid.”

This draws Ronnie’s curiosity, he can tell. “Huh. Was it true?”

Patrick shrugs. “I still don’t know.”

“Tell you what,” she says, holding up a finger for emphasis, “these things don’t matter unless they’re tested.”

“Oh, is that why you like to push peoples’ boundaries so much?”

“So you’re saying I’mpushy.”

“I mean.” He sucks air through his teeth and winces. “Takes one to know one?”

She scowls at him and waves a hand towards the couch; Patrick sits down with her, gingerly. “I heard from Derrick that you want to start some kind of queer youth club.”

“I wanted to, but Derrick talked me into just doing what I could for the one kid I knew, instead.”
“Better to start small,” Ronnie agrees. “But it’s still a good idea. There’s an approval meeting for the final school budget for this year coming up. PTA and Town Council. It’s open to the public. Why don’t you show? Get your idea on the radar for next year’s budget.”


“The kid you’re working with. How are they?”

“Good, I think,” Patrick says. “I have no clue what I’m doing.”

“Yeah, welcome to the club.” She takes a sip of her whiskey, her elbows resting on her knees.

“Do you ever get . . . tired of it? You’ve been doing this a long time.”


Patrick nods, thinking through that distinction. “I hear your seat’s coming up for election soon, on Council,” Patrick says. “If you’re running again, and you need someone to put up lawn signs or hand out flyers, I’ll be there.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Ronnie says. She sighs. “I don’t know. Maybe I do get tired of it. When I started these nights, it was just to get some lesbians together, to mingle.”

“It was a lesbian hookup night?” Patrick asks, surprised.

“No,” Ronnie scowls. Then, a second later, she laughs. “Well. Sorta. Maybe.” Patrick snorts. “But more people started coming, and the network got bigger and bigger, and before too long people were coming to me with their problems.”

“The more problems you fix, the more people bring you,” Patrick says.

Ronnie snaps her fingers and points at him. “Exactly.”

They nod together, slowly. Patrick feels the silence shift around them. There’s so much he sees in Ronnie that he knows he has in himself, too, for good or bad. They’re alike.

“I never told Karen this,” Ronnie says, quietly. She’s not looking at Patrick. “But there was a time, about ten years ago, when I thought about moving away. Going to the city. This was when . . . well. We were going through a rough patch. And while I felt like my marriage was imploding, everyone kept coming to me with their petty bullshit problems. So I thought seriously about just . . . picking up and going someplace easier. Let someone else do the work here, for a change.”

Patrick nods into this confession, feeling it. “You think it’s easier in the city? Pride parades and stuff?” He wouldn’t know; he’s only been to big cities on vacations, and not that often. Winnipeg. Toronto. Québec City, for his grade twelve French class trip, holding hands with Rachel and walking on the city fortifications that had become too small to hold the city years and years ago.

“Hm. I don’t know. But there’s that idea, right, that you can go somewhere no one knows you, and be anonymous, and have no expectations to live up to.”

“Yeah,” Patrick swallows. “I know what you mean.” He tries to figure out what to say next, thoughts swarming through his head. “I don’t know if that’s real. You can’t be anonymous to yourself. Or, not for very long.”

“Yeah.” She sips her whiskey.
“Why didn’t you go?” Patrick asks.

Ronnie shrugs. “This is where I was meant to be,” she says. She turns to look at him. “If you want a damned Pride parade, you can organize one.”

“Maybe I will,” Patrick smiles. “Would you come, if I did?”

“Patrick,” Ronnie says, slowly, raising an eyebrow, gesturing broadly at the space around them. “I love a party.”

Patrick chuckles. There’s another little silence between them, and he can’t tell if it’s awkward or if it’s just the kind of silence they have together, but after a moment, he finds himself saying something to her that he hasn’t really given voice to before.

“I sometimes wonder who I’m turning into, here,” he says. “I know I’m not who I was a couple years ago.”

She shrugs. “We turn into what we need to be. What other people need us to be. The thing is to balance those.”

“Yeah.” Patrick frowns.

Ronnie huffs out a laugh and finishes her drink in a shot, then slams the glass down on the table, bursting his melancholy little bubble. “Enough self-reflection,” she says, looking over at him. “There’s shit to do. Who cares who you are. What’re you gonna do?”

“You mean, besides beat you at municipal baseball?” He grins.

“Hey, we’ll see how long that title lasts. Rookie. But yeah. Besides that.”

“I guess I’ll show up at the PTA meeting with Town Council,” Patrick says.

“That’s right, you will,” she agrees. “And the next thing after that, and the next one.”

“I see it,” Patrick says, because he does: the long-term management that goes into building and maintaining community ties. He’s always liked long-term planning. He can see the work stretching ahead of him, years and years of it. He relishes the thought.

Ronnie stands up, taking her empty glass with her. “Twyla can’t host the next one of these,” she says. “Her mom’s not well lately. You should do it.”

Patrick mulls it over. “On one condition,” he says. At her raised eyebrow, he continues, “We should put a P in the acronym. For pansexual.”

Ronnie shrugs. “Yeah. Okay. I mean, when I started, it was just an L, so. Let’s keep making it bigger.”

With that, she walks off.

Later in the night, he runs into Karen in the kitchen. “Patrick!” she says. “Hey. Come look at this.” She steers him by the shoulder down the hall a little ways, and directs his attention to the pictures on the wall. He’s never seen them before, but looking at them, he realizes that it’s years and years of baseball teams, some of them posed shots of everyone in their uniforms, some of them candids or action shots. There’s one of Ronnie’s team from this year, standing together around the bleachers, drinking beers and smiling in the sun. Ronnie’s in the middle of it with Roland and Danielle, her
head thrown back in laughter.

“You take a great photo,” Patrick says. “I love that one.”

“Thanks,” Karen says, “but I also wanted you to see this.” She points him to the photo right below it; it’s a picture of his team on the day they won the championship, of David with his arms in the air while Patrick kisses his cheek and the whole team around them, in a frame that matches the one of Ronnie and her team.

“Wow,” Patrick says.

Karen grins. “I’ll send you a copy.”

“I—yes, thanks, I would like that. So, you’re telling me that, for Ronnie, walking by this picture every time she goes down the hallway doesn’t infuriate her?” Patrick asks, incredulous.

“Ha. Maybe a little. She definitely prefers to memorialize the wins.” Karen reaches out and touches the side of the frame. “But I think this was her favourite loss yet.”

Patrick looks up at her. “She informed me that I’m hosting the next shindig,” he says.

“Did she,” Karen says, holding back a smile.

Ronnie’s philosophy about action aside, Patrick finds that the question keeps occurring to him, of who he is, who he’s become when he wasn’t looking, who he might turn into. It’s spurred on by a lot of the little conversations he ends up having on Facebook or over text with various members of his family, the way they’re all seeing him suddenly after more than a year of careful distance. He imagines himself through their eyes, and wonders if he sounds different, if his jokes or his ideas or his personality are different, now that he’s happy. It’s possible, he thinks, that being in Schitt’s Creek, being given room to grow and discover himself in a safe place, has made him change more than he knows.

He tells Hallie about the dreams he and David have for opening up additional locations all through the region, and she sends back a horrified face emoji.

**Patrick:** What?

**Hallie:** Nothing, I just remember when I was eight and you were twelve and I told you I wanted to open a music store and you said that retail is the riskiest kind of business venture and I should be smarter than that

**Patrick:** I didn’t say that at twelve

**Hallie:** you DID

**Patrick:** Well, I was right, a music store WAS a bad idea, no one buys CDs anymore

**Hallie:** Unlike the solid and well-known apothecary model!!!

He rolls his eyes and lets her make fun of him some more. She’s not wrong, though; it is a little early for them to be talking expansion. They should really spend five or ten years letting their brand build, putting away profits. David makes him try things that he wouldn’t, otherwise, makes him see possibilities that wouldn’t occur to him. It’s always been that way.
Hallie: Your boyfriend is turning you into a risk-taker

Patrick: You know, I can remember it now, you being really annoying when you were eight

Patrick: Guess nothing changes

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For some reason, that conversation sticks with him when they go in to get the choreography for some of the dance numbers for the show. He keeps thinking about his little cousin, who he used to pick up from wild parties so she wouldn’t drive drunk but didn’t have to call her parents, who he used to lecture when she threatened to run away from home, whose sketchy homemade drugs he used to confiscate and flush—he keeps thinking about her calling him a risk-taker.

Because the thing is, he’s really not: when the number they’re supposed to do for “Wilkommen” is explained, with Max demonstrating and Mrs Rose using the words hip thrust at him, Patrick wants nothing more than to run home and do something safe with a spreadsheet.

Jocelyn attempts to take them through it, putting them all in place and moving them around, but there are so many moves and they’re so fast and so complex, with multiple people weaving in and out around each other, that everything they try at rehearsal ends in feet being stepped on and tempers flaring and, occasionally, Alexis falling over.

“Shoulder, shoulder, hip, hip,” Mrs Rose yells at him, clapping on each word. Patrick still has no idea what that means. His shoulders don’t move that way. They never have before.

Eventually, after hours of frustration, Jocelyn puts them all out of their misery. “Okay, work on it at home, folks, and we’ll come back refreshed to the next rehearsal! I’m just . . . so excited. To see how this all comes together.” Her smile is wide and fixed, her encouraging nod stiff. Patrick doesn’t blame her. He doesn’t know what he’d tell them, either.

“If you keep fucking landing on my instep during the Money number, I am never covering the store for you again,” Stevie mutters, threateningly, as they leave.

“Me! You’re the one who headbutted me in the gut.”

“Excuse me if I’ve never done a handless cartwheel before!” Stevie says. “I used to skip gym.”

Patrick shakes his head. He never used to skip gym, but then Coach Dempsey never clapped at him while yelling shoulder shoulder hip hip, like those were parts of his body that moved independently from the others.

“We need help.”

Stevie snorts. “Good luck with that. Mrs Rose would never accept anyone else interfering with her vision. Except maybe David.”

“Well, that’s no help. David’s—like his mom.” He winces, because it sounds like he’s saying David’s also difficult and capricious, which isn’t what he means, but Stevie just nods.

“She has a vision, and doesn’t get why other people can’t see it.”

Patrick breathes out in relief, nodding. “I really think the dance numbers she’s seeing in her head are great. It’s just that we’re missing the person who can put them into our heads.”

“So we need a secret dance expert,” Stevie says. “Do you know one?”
“Um. Actually,” Patrick says. “If you’re willing to chip in with me to hire him, I kind of do.”

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Derrick, as it turns out, is between gigs just then, his touring production having just wrapped, and is happy to squeeze them in while he’s waiting to go back to his teaching in the fall.

Working with him and Stevie is actually a lot of fun, despite the endless squats that make him want to die. He starts to think that he might have a handle on some of the moves, how they blend into one another, how to set his body up to be in the right position to make the next move in the sequence. The way Derrick explains it, it feels like learning how to throw a baseball, or how to skate: a series of actions his body can take to do what needs to be done. After a few lessons, he’s feeling like he might embarrass himself at least a little less when he tries to do this in front of people.

“Okay and jump, good, and settle strong. Patrick, right here where she needs you—Stevie, weight on the front leg, that’s right—”

Even at half speed, the cartwheel still ends up with Patrick awkwardly hugging Stevie’s middle while she slides, slowly, out of his grasp and onto the floor, like a sack of potatoes.

“I don’t think it was right,” Stevie pants.

Derrick is a professional and works with middle schoolers, which is why Patrick presumes he’s not laughing his head off right now. His lips are kind of twitching.

“It was progress,” Derrick says. “You’re getting closer.”

“Can we stop for the night?” Patrick begs. “If I do that jump thing one more time my thighs are going to crumble into dust.”

“You’re supposed to be the big athlete,” Stevie says, laughing, even though Patrick’s sure she’s done for the night, too.

“Sports uses normal muscles,” Patrick protests. “Not whatever this one in my back is.” He points to the one in his back. It is currently unhappy.

“Just think how in shape you’ll both be after this,” Derrick says, watching them. “If you kept this up, you’d be super toned.”

Patrick lets himself slide down onto the floor next to Stevie in protest of that idea. He gets why she didn’t get up; the floor is nice and cool. Cool, friendly floor.

“Oh, do you think we’d make professional dancers one day?” Patrick says, in his best hopeful aw-shucks voice. Derrick does laugh at that, which hurts a little.

“I mean, don’t let me step on your dreams,” he says. “You are getting a lot more of the moves down.”

Patrick knows what he means: he can go where Derrick puts him, with a hand on his shoulder or his arm, but he’s still not . . . loose, in the way he’s supposed to be. Fluid.

“That’s something.”

Derrick flops down on the floor next to them.

“If you’re down here, who’s getting the wine,” Stevie cries out, not at all phrased as a question.
“You put us through this and you won’t even bring the wine from my bag.”

“All right,” Derrick laughs. He gets back up—easily, from a low squat, because he’s an asshole—and gets Stevie’s bag for her. Stevie rolls over enough to pour them each a little plastic cup full. Luckily her wine is the screwtop kind. He doesn’t think he can reach his shoe right now to try David’s trick.

“Cheers,” Patrick says, still breathing hard. They all clink the plastic and take a healthy sip.

Derrick smiles. “Gotta say, you two are my favourite private dance clients. None of the eight year olds bring me wine. Not even . . . really shitty wine.” He looks down into his cup doubtfully.

“What are they teaching the youth these days,” Stevie tsks, from behind her cup.

Patrick takes another sip. It really is shitty. “Stevie, you get wine at the store all the time, how is this the stuff you bring to rehearsal?”

“You’re too tired to appreciate good stuff,” Stevie says.

“Derrick isn’t.”

“Derrick is a monster.”

“I’m having fun doing this with you guys, too,” Derrick says. “Especially because of all the compliments.”

“We’ll be more grateful when we’re drunker,” Patrick promises, and takes another big sip. “You aren’t driving back to Elmdale tonight?”

Derrick shakes his head. “Steven’s coming to get me.”

“That’s sweet of him,” Stevie says.

“Convenient for you,” Patrick says, pouring them each a little more from the bottle.

“It’s nice having a good boyfriend,” Derrick agrees. Stevie groans.

“Stop talking about all the cute boys you two are dating that I’m not,” she says.

“Hey, you had a crack at my boyfriend years ago,” Patrick protests. “Not my fault you didn’t follow through on that.”

“Wait, what’s this story?” Derrick asks. “You used to date David?”

“Date isn’t the term I’d use,” Stevie grins, and tells the rest of it. It’s interesting, getting her perspective on the story; she agrees with David on all the details but tells the emotions completely differently. The way she tells it, she was a lot deeper in than he was, back then, or than he was willing to admit to. In Stevie’s version, she’s also a lot more of a mess, pushing David away, playing games. She talks about it in a distanced, ironic way, but still, there’s a spiky sort of vulnerability to her, as she tells that story, that Patrick’s not sure he’s ever seen from her before. She and Patrick joke around a lot, and they give David a hard time together like it’s a team Olympic sport, but she doesn’t usually get this soft around the edges, not with him.

He often assumes that she’s done a lot to mellow David out, over the years, but in moments like this it’s clear that he did the same for her. That they’ve been good for each other.
“Anyway. Why am I telling you this? Patrick, I have to assume you already heard all this from David.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, feeling suddenly tender towards her. “But in David’s version there’s a lot more, like, ‘oh, Stevie’s so gorgeous’ and ‘oh, Stevie’s so funny and smart.’ Bit hard to take, really.”

The grin that spreads over Stevie’s face is half Cheshire Cat and half Alice lost in the woods and David’s right; it really is gorgeous. She really is gorgeous.

“Sounds like you left a mark,” Derrick tells her, smiling.

“Believe me, I’m glad she did,” Patrick says, and they laugh.

Stevie pours them all some more wine. “So, teach, you gonna have us ready for the big show? Because it seems like a bunch of our dance moves right now end with you lying on the floor and drinking with us.”

Derrick chuckles. “We’ve gotta get a French word for that one. Get them to teach it to students at the École de Danse de Paris.” He does a little twist with his arms that, even sitting down on a dusty floor, looks graceful. “It sounds like a ballet move.”

“You teach ballet, too?” Patrick asks, surprised. Derrick shrugs.

“Didn’t train in it, much, really. But when you’re adjuncting and making up your salary with private lessons, you learn to teach whatever.”

“That sucks,” Stevie says, and downs the rest of her wine.

There’s a little pause. Patrick makes a note to take Derrick for dinner, after opening night, in addition to what they’re paying him. He doesn’t really charge enough, commensurate with the service he provides. Patrick could help him develop a sliding scale, maybe. A comparison chart to other private dance instructors in the area? A marketing campaign to justify higher rates? He’s too tired to think it through. He’ll try to think about it tomorrow.

“I think you’ll both be great in the show,” Derrick says. “If you can’t get this choreography, we can find ways to bring it down a little. We’ll make you look good, no matter what.”

Patrick’s seen Derrick do both of their halves of this number, dancing Stevie’s part with Patrick and Patrick’s part with Stevie, and it’s still hard to understand how he does it, how his body moves that way. It’s effortless, for him, or it seems like that.

“I guess if you don’t have that early training, it’s hard to make your body do all this stuff,” Patrick says.

Derrick looks over at him, interested. “Not necessarily. It’s just a matter of . . . figuring out how all the parts of you are connected. There’s a lot that practice can do for you.”

“We’re trying, here,” Stevie protests, gesturing widely at the space around them.

“But there’s also a principle behind it, of what the body is capable of,” Derrick continues, waving a hand in the air. Patrick refills his wine again, interested in what he’s saying. “We don’t often consider how we train our bodies to move in certain predictable ways. For work, for things like sports,” he nods at Patrick, “for social interaction. How we move with each other and in each other’s space, it’s all deeply scripted. Dance can sometimes ask us to imagine how we would move if we were motivated only by our emotions, or our relationships to others. How we would move if we had never
been trained, never learned those scripts. So in a way, it’s the opposite: it’s about unlearning.”

Patrick thinks about his shoulder that gets sore from too much computer work, the way his face gets tired of smiling when they’ve had too many customers at the store. He thinks about how he crosses his arms around other men, sometimes, and how David kissing him can sometimes make him uncross them. He feels even more despair, thinking about all of that, because there’s no way he can unlearn so much in so little time. He can learn the moves, but what Derrick’s describing—he thinks it’s beyond him.

“Wow,” Stevie says, after a pause. “Do you drop this heavy stuff on the eight year olds?”

Derrick laughs. “They don’t need it as much as the grownups do.”

They pour out the last of the bottle, talking about little stuff, what to practice on their own, what to have ready for next time. Stevie and Patrick tell Derrick the latest gossip from rehearsal, Stevie almost making Derrick snort his wine at her Moira Rose impression, and Derrick in turn tells them wild and ridiculous stories of productions he’s been in. It’s a good time, and Patrick lets himself laugh and enjoy it, but at the back of his mind, he’s still thinking about what Derrick said, about unlearning, about being free from scripts. He thinks it’s what Mrs Rose wants him to do with his arms, and he still doesn’t know how to do it.

When their cups are empty, Stevie and Patrick move all the stuff back and pick up their props while Derrick packs his boom box.

“Same time Thursday?” he asks, putting up his hood and sticking his hands into his pockets as they prepare to face the rain outside.

“Yeah,” Patrick says, wondering if any number of lessons will be enough. “We still need the practice.”

* 

When the rings come back from the jeweler’s, the idea of the proposal starts to feel real. He thinks about putting it off until after the show wraps; that would be the reasonable thing to do, since things are so hectic and half of David’s family are part of the production.

He doesn’t think he can do it, though. The desire to ask David to marry him is too big, filling up too much of his mind and his heart and his lungs: he can’t keep it in forever.

It should be weird, maybe, that he’s going to do this again, ask another human being to marry him. He’s going to propose to another human being, to David, that they spend the rest of their lives together, and furthermore that they throw a big party where they announce that commitment to everyone they know.

He wants the party, this time. He wants the commitment. He wants the lifetime. He’s itchy for it, excited for it.

Still, he was engaged to Rachel less than two years ago, and he thinks it’s fast; or, he feels like he should feel like it’s fast. He keeps turning the thought over in his mind, trying to provoke himself into some kind of panic or self-doubt. He really ought to be feeling panic or self-doubt. He was wrong to propose to Rachel, years ago, and it seems to him that he should be worried that he’s wrong now, that this will go badly too. He should have some kind of trauma about it.

No matter how hard he pokes at the idea, though, in the shower, in bed before sleep, on bad days when he’s cranky and annoyed, all the worst times . . . the negative thoughts won’t come. All he
feels is calm, and sure, and settled. He was so lost, when he was with Rachel, denying himself so much: the way he could feel about love, and sex, and letting other people truly know him. He can see it now, how closed off he was, how empty.

Now, running his fingers over the gold bands in the black velvet box, he knows that the person he was back then could never have recognized the person he is now, the way he moves through the world, the friendships he has, the community he lives in. The work he does. The sexuality that just keeps growing within him. The person he was back then would be shocked.

He puts the rings away, carefully, in a drawer. It’s the right decision. Everything inside him sings with it. There’s no anxiety or fear to accompany it. It’s the easiest decision he’s ever made.

Now he just needs to figure out how and when to let David in on it.

*

Rather than trying to explain it to her, he just shows the rings to Stevie, who, of course, gets it immediately, and gasps, her hand over her mouth. Patrick even thinks he sees tears at the corners of her eyes, before she ruthlessly clears her throat and frowns.

“Uh, shouldn’t you be giving those to David?” she asks, coming out from behind her desk and taking the box from him so she can look at the rings more closely.

Patrick nods. “I’m going to. I just wanted to, you know. Ask for your blessing.”

“My blessing,” Stevie laughs. “So like, if I don’t give it, you’ll back off? Break up with him?”

“No, I’m gonna do it anyway. Pretty sure there’s not much that could stop me from doing it, at this point.” He’s feeling tears of his own, so he sucks a little air through his teeth, ruefully, and blinks them away.

Stevie notices, of course, and her face softens. “That’s . . . really sweet,” she says. “So, okay. How do I do it?”

“Do what?”

“Give you my blessing.”

Patrick blinks. “I think you just—say it. I don’t know, I’ve never done this before.”

“You didn’t ask your ex-fiancée’s family for their blessing?”

“I could barely ask my ex-fiancée for hers,” Patrick says. He observes, again, how different this time is from that time, how much he’s changed, how much less fear he feels.

Stevie’s brow furrows. “And . . . why me? And not Mr or Mrs Rose?”

“Well, I thought, first of all, that you’d have a better sense of whether it was a good idea, or whether I should like. Sit on this for another couple months. I can wait if, you know, if you think David needs me to wait. But I really don’t want to.” He’s never felt so impatient in his life, as he has since he picked up these rings.

“Uh-huh. And second of all?”

“And, second of all,” Patrick takes a breath, trying to articulate, even to himself, why this was important to him. “Second of all, David loves his parents and his sister, but. Sometimes I think
what’s more important is the family that we choose for ourselves, you know? You’re that, to him. I think that’s why you two . . . know each other, so well. Why you know him better than his original family does.”

“Huh.” Stevie doesn’t say anything else for a moment, and Patrick sweats.

“So?” he asks, eventually.

“So, I’m thinking about it. You’re right, you know. David is family to me.” She holds up a warning hand. “And if you ever tell him I said so I will rip out your tongue, Brewer, I swear to God.”

“Okay.” Patrick laughs uncertainly. “I think he would say you’re family to him, too.”

“Yeah. I know. So that’s why this is—you’re right, this is important.” She heaves out a sigh. “You know the shit he’s been through. Fucking Bianca.”

“And James,” Patrick agrees.

“Sebastien,” they say together.

Patrick frowns. “Yeah. I know.”

“And good God does he love you,” Stevie continues. “He’s never loved anyone like that before.”

Patrick feels tears springing to his eyes, and he doesn’t even know what emotion they’re attached to—doesn’t know if what he’s feeling is love or guilt, tenderness or self-doubt or fear. “Yeah. I—I haven’t either.”

“We’re not talking about you right now,” Stevie says, eyes boring into his. “We’re talking about David. Who would do anything for you, and follow you to the ends of the Earth, because you matter to him in a way no one else ever has. Do you get that?”

He does; he gets it; he meets her gaze. “I get it. It’s a lot of power.”

“David trusts you,” Stevie says. “And if you’re asking me honestly, like, as your friend, as David’s family, for my blessing, I’m going to take that seriously, even if it means I have to talk about feelings. That is, if you want my real opinion.”

“Yeah. I want it,” Patrick says, and it feels like swallowing his heart.

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“Then my opinion is that you’ve made him cry before, too, and put him through some shit, and you’ve hidden important things from him, and if you’re gonna marry him, you need to remember how much he trusts you.”

Patrick closes his eyes, breathing out slowly. He wants to defend himself, to explain all the reasons behind his bad decisions, to make her see how he’s changed. He wants to say: I was afraid, and I was stupid, and I was an asshole, because I thought I was alone. But he keeps those words in his throat, doesn’t let them out. What he’s been through is real, but what she’s saying is real, too. It’s not like he’s fixed now, like he’s perfect. He knows he still has shit to work on. And he’ll either prove himself to her over time, or he won’t.

“I’m going to,” he says, eventually. “Stevie, I’m never going to forget that. I swear it. I trust him too.” He swallows. “I’m asking him to marry me because I never want to do anything without him, ever again. I want to tell him everything, from now on. And I want to fuck up . . . a lot less.”
She looks at him for a long moment, and eventually nods her head. “Okay,” she says. “Then I’m gonna trust you with my brother. Slash ex-lover.”

“Well, this is a weird family you’re asking to be a part of. And I’m not even the weirdest one.” Although her voice still sounds steady, Stevie reaches up and dashes a tear away from her eye, barely acknowledging it. “But bear in mind, Patrick, that if you break David’s trust, he’ll be hurt. But if you break mine, I’ll be furious.”

“Noted,” Patrick agrees. He licks his lips. He’s surprised how happy it makes him, to hear Stevie threaten him; it makes the whole thing, the proposal, the idea of marrying David, feel real, in a way it didn’t before. It’s real; it’s a commitment; it has consequences. And it makes him feel like she’s on his side, on their side, that she’s going to be a part of his family too. Their family, his and David’s. “You know what you said isn’t quite true, though.”

“Oh yeah?” She shakes her hair out of her face and rubs away another stray tear with her thumb. “I’m not the only person he’s ever loved like that. I think it was slower, and different, for you two, but. I think you were his first.”

“Patrick Brewer,” Stevie says, with an evil little squint and a grin that breaks over her face like the sun coming through the clouds. “Are you jealous?”

“Always,” Patrick says, truthfully. “You?”

“Very occasionally,” Stevie allows. “But I think David’s also jealous of us, for having each other as friends. As he should be, because we’re awesome.”

“Agreed,” Patrick smiles. “So? You gonna call the play, here?”

“Yeah, okay. You can have my blessing. On the condition that you’ll promise to treat him right, and not be a dick, and not put up with his bullshit, and call me so I can come along for all the adventures. Do you swear to do all that?”

“I do,” Patrick says, as solemnly as he can while trying not to laugh, or cry.

“I do too. All right. I hereby bless your engagement.” She makes a magnanimous, queenly gesture. “Thank you,” he nods his head in somber acknowledgement. “Thank you, Stevie. For all of it.” He tries to gesture, to encompass everything he means, everything she’s meant to David and everything she’s meant to him, but he can’t quite do it; it’s more of a David-level gesture, well beyond his skills. He decides to try something else instead. “Um. Can I hug you?”

She sighs and opens her arms, and Patrick squeezes her gratefully.

“You’re welcome,” she says.

He lets her go and steps back, then bites his lip, remembering the other reason he asked her. “And . . . you think I should do it soon? Or wait?”

“Uh, think I already answered that. David’s ass over teakettle in love with you and you could do it today,” Stevie says firmly. Patrick feels a smile rush across his face.

“Okay,” he says.
“So?” Stevie asks. “How’re you gonna do it?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Patrick says.

“For David, it better be really fucking romantic.”

He frowns, because he’s had that thought, too. David loves romance, and he’s only gonna get one shot at this. “Thanks, love the pressure.”


A few minutes later, Patrick’s putting the rings away in the glovebox of his car, so that he doesn’t lose them under a seat or something during the trip home. While he’s got the glovebox open, though, something else falls out and onto the floor. He picks it up; it’s a napkin from the café.

When he flips it over, he sees Ronnie’s neat, precise diagram, her map showing the way up to the hike at Roberts’ Point. He traces his fingers over the lines, the little labels. She made this for him back when he was caught up in the first rush of feelings towards his business partner. When he needed someone to lead him to the next step, some place to start to figure things out. Ronnie gave him that.

Now, the little map is leading him somewhere else.

*

“Costumes are in,” Stevie says, in that arch way that she has, when he walks into their next rehearsal. Patrick eyeballs her suspiciously.

“And?” he says.

“And, I’m really excited to see you in yours,” she replies, promptly.

Patrick goes to look at the little rack of outfits. He vaguely recognizes the woman hanging them up.

“Shawna?” he asks, hesitantly. She turns to smile at him.

“You’re Patrick, right? I think I made you curtains. I know your boyfriend.”

“Yeah.” He swallows, then points. “Is that—-is that mine?” It has a little bowtie, but he’s wondering where the rest of it is.

“Yup! Wanna try it?”

“What do I do with—what are these straps for?”

“Oh, they’re to create the codpiece effect,” Shawna answers, brightly.

Patrick puts it on in the bathroom, or he thinks he does, anyway, trying to keep his breathing even while he looks at himself in the mirror.

There is definitely a codpiece . . . effect. The bowtie dangles over his bare chest. He’s never felt more naked, including all the times when he was actually naked.

He puts his street clothes back on before coming out of the bathroom.

“Oh—you should keep it on, let me make alterations,” Shawna says.
“I need to . . . go. Somewhere,” he says.

Stevie laughs at him as he flees. He’s so distracted, shooting her a murderous glare, that he almost runs into Mrs Rose, who’s coming the other way.

“Patrick! Where could you be rushing off to? Rehearsal is about to begin!”

Patrick, who hadn’t actually known where he was rushing off to, finds himself uncomfortably close to Mrs Rose, inside her personal space with her hands hovering over his arms and her eyes boring into his.

“Nowhere,” Patrick says, eventually.

“He’s afraid of his costume!” Stevie calls, from behind cupped hands. Patrick would actually curse at her if Mrs Rose weren’t still standing so close to him. He takes a step back.

“Ah,” Mrs Rose says. “I admit I had some small inkling that this might happen. Come with me, my Emcee.” She extends a hand across Patrick’s shoulders, as if to touch him, but doesn’t actually touch him, instead leaving a couple inches of space between them. It’s just as effective as if she had wrapped her arm around him, though, in that she uses that two-inch buffer to lead him to a quiet corner of the room.

By the time they get there, Patrick’s feeling wildly embarrassed and wants to pretend like he wasn’t afraid of his costume, but is also wondering if being afraid of his costume might mean he gets a different one. He can’t decide whether to reassure her that he’s fine or beg her to take pity on him.

They sit together on the edge of a crate, some piece of equipment or set dressing that arrived today, presumably. Mrs Rose is wearing extremely high platform heels with fishnets and a skirt apparently made out of black feathers, along with a sleek giant-shouldered blouse and a white wig that flows down her back. Which makes it pretty impressive to watch her sit down on a box that’s only a foot off the ground; you’d think it would take more doing, but she just flows downward like it’s the most comfortable thing in the world, and her outfit settles around her perfectly.

“Now, Patrick, I am quite sure that I understand your reservations,” she says, slowly, “but I was rather hoping that a more risqué costume would make you better able to scale the creative block that has been in your path these past weeks.”

“You thought wearing thigh straps would make me more comfortable as a dancer?” Patrick asks, incredulously.

Mrs Rose waves this away, like the question is insubstantial, a mere wisp of smoke on the breeze. “Is your character comfortable? Do you feel comfortable, playing him?”

“No,” Patrick responds. He’s pretty sure that’s a double no.

“So we shall harness that discomfort,” Mrs Rose concludes, “and pass it on to the audience.”

Patrick tries not to wince at the metaphor of harnessing discomfort being applied to the suspenders that are intended to highlight his cock.

“Well, if your goal is making people uncomfortable, then that outfit definitely works,” Patrick says, shaking his head.

“Ah! Then you do see,” Mrs Rose says, smiling.
“No, I—I guess I see what you mean, but I still—I can’t—it’s not me.” He frowns, because he knows what she’ll say: that of course it’s not him, it’s his character, and hasn’t he been paying attention to all the work they’ve been doing?

She doesn’t, though. Instead she nods, slowly. “You know, I was once in a production of Criminals in Love, directed by Walter Gutterman, this was in my younger days, naturally, and Gutterman wanted me in this—ugh. Well. I had the figure for it then, of course, but it was still not quite what the character called for. It was not, for me, the near nudity or even the tassels, but rather the incongruity with the character work I had been doing.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, wondering where this is going, wondering what he’s going to have to do to get the image of David’s mother wearing tassels out of his head. Probably tell David about it.

“I did not protest the costume, however,” she continues, “and as a result I believe I gave one of the worst performances of my career. All for the sake of some director whose ego and whose lust outweighed the demands of the art. And yet there have been times when my doubts were in error, when I had merely to trust to the vision being crafted around me, with my humble contribution as but a piece of a larger whole. There have been times when I did not see that, I confess it. I have always lived an actor’s life, thus, subservient to the whims of others.” She pauses. “Patrick. May I express something in confidence?”

“Um. Yes. Of course.” He almost feels like he should touch her, maybe pat her hand, to comfort her. The idea of doing that feels vaguely absurd, though, like a sudden whim to climb Everest or step up to the plate and get a hit off of Stroman. He isn’t trained for this. He stays still. There’s a long silence. He tries thinking about Stroman, about his two-seam fastball, about his slider.

Eventually, Mrs Rose interrupts his train of thought. “I must admit that on this side of the clapboard, things do not appear so simple as I once thought they would. I confess myself unsure as to whether I ought to push you or be compassionate with you. And I am doubly unsure of myself given your romantic involvement with David. What will be best for the performance may not, in this case, be the best method for preserving your relationship with our family.”

Patrick lets himself have a few moments to take all this in. It’s far more than he’s ever heard her say before, not in terms of word count, but in terms of emotion. Mrs Rose is never this vulnerable; just look at her shoes.

“I guess . . . I don’t know either,” he says, eventually. “But I don’t plan on leaving David if you’re too tough on me as a director.”

“Of course.” Mrs Rose smiles at him, and it’s so much like David’s fake smile that he spots it right away. “I thought not.”

“Can you—maybe push me in a compassionate way?” Patrick asks. “Help me through the hard parts?”

“Hmm. I can certainly try,” she says, the smile beginning to reach her eyes. “Let’s try this: I believe I shall suggest that you take your costume home with you, to begin the acclimatization process in private. We can speak about tweaks next week. In the interim, we shall rehearse in street clothes.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, because at least he doesn’t have to wear that in front of Stevie today. “Thank you.”

“You know, Gutterman may have been a miscreant, but on one point, he was not mistaken. The costume can allow you to be a version of yourself you might never see, otherwise, might never
access. There is a gift in that.”

Patrick stands, then offers his hand to her. She takes it, allowing him to pretend to help her to her feet. How she actually does it, in those heels, without putting any weight on his hand, is a mystery to him.

“I’ll . . . try to remember that,” Patrick says.

The rest of the rehearsal actually goes well; Patrick’s so relieved to be doing it not in his new costume that he finds himself a little more relaxed, a little more able to move through the choreography and find the right notes in every song.

“So? Are you wearing the crotch-suspenders?” Stevie asks him, afterwards.

“We’ll see,” Patrick replies, thoughtfully.

* *

He doesn’t want to show the costume to David, and when he comes over the next night for dinner, he tells himself he’s not going to. They make pasta together, and eat, and make conversation, and then Patrick suggests that David pick a movie. That’s apparently David’s breaking point.

“Oh, what is up with you?” he asks, hands on his waist.

“What do you mean, what is up with me?”

“You’re being weird. Like. Polite. And quiet. It’s freaking me out.”

Patrick frowns; he didn’t realize he was doing that. He goes over to where David is sitting on the couch and sits next to him, taking one of his hands. “Sorry. I’m— it’s not you. I’m just a little worried about the show.”

“Oh. Is this about the choreography again? Because I suppose I can distract my mom for another dance lesson or two.”

Patrick gives him a half a smile, in thanks for doing the distracting, feeling a little guilty because he thinks he might still need a lot more than two. He won’t tell David that part just yet, though. “It’s sort of that. It’s also—” he sighs. He wasn’t going to tell David about it, mostly because he didn’t want David to make fun of him, but also because it’s weird and frustrating. Embarrassing, to not be comfortable enough in his skin by now to do something like this. “The costumes came in yesterday.”

“Ohhh,” David says, long and slow. “Right.”

Patrick looks up at him sharply. “David,” he says, slowly, “did you know about the costume your mom was planning for me?”

“No— exactly?” David winces. “I may have expressed that she should take some creative risks? In general, creative risks in general. And I, uh. Saw the sketches. I didn’t think she’d go through with them!”

“Well, she did,” Patrick says, his voice rising. “Why didn’t you stop her?”

David’s eyes dart from side to side, and Patrick buries his face in his hands, laughing.

“It’s not my fault if I think my boyfriend is hot!” David protests. “I didn’t tell her to do it, I just didn’t . . . say no.” Patrick looks up at him then, and he’s biting his lip. “Do you want me to talk to her?”
“I don’t—I don’t know,” Patrick says, giving up and collapsing back against the couch cushions. “I just keep thinking . . . it’s not just the dancing, or just the costume. I keep thinking I don’t know how to play this role at all, and I’m gonna fuck it all up, and be a laughingstock.”

“Hmm,” David says, in acknowledgement, stroking his back.

When he doesn’t say anything else, Patrick goes on. “I never used to have this problem on stage. I never felt silly or. Vulnerable.”

“Okay. Well. I’m guessing that when you played the tin man or whatever the costume didn’t make you reflect critically on your gender performance,” David says, and Patrick turns to look at him.

“I was the scarecrow,” he says. “And it’s not—I mean. I’ve always been comfortable in regular guy clothes. I never felt any need to do anything else.”

“Sometimes it’s not about need. Or who you are. It can just be about luxury, or experimentation. Play.”

Patrick sighs, because that’s the gist of what Derrick had said. Mrs Rose, too. He doesn’t know why it’s so terrifying to him.

“When did you start . . . experimenting? With clothing?”

“What makes you think I experimented?” David asks, looking him straight in the eye. Patrick trembles for a second before David grins. “No, I have no idea. My mom used me as a prop at auditions sometimes, so I was in costume before I was out of diapers. Growing up that way, you sort of start to see everything as a costume, so, my mom’s red carpet dresses, my dad’s suits, school uniforms, all of it. Dress up to serve a purpose. Just many different kinds of drag.”

Patrick trails his hand down David’s arm; today he’s in a light grey sweater with black birds in flight all over it, along with his favourite skirted pants, the ones Patrick once wondered how to get into. Now they’re familiar to him, don’t even strike him as odd anymore. He definitely knows how to get into them, when he wants to.

“And now?” Patrick asks, playing with the cuff of the sweater.

“Now, I just wear what makes me feel gorgeous, and confident. And. And safe.”

The last part sounds like something David wouldn’t have readily admitted, if Patrick weren’t so freaked out and obviously in need of the truth. Patrick leans over and draws a thumb along his jaw, slowly, before he kissing his mouth.

“You are gorgeous,” Patrick says. David smiles at him, a hand on his chest.

“You could think of it as a uniform, like for a baseball game. Like armour,” he suggests.

Patrick frowns. “But that’s the thing, I don’t feel . . . protected. I feel the opposite, exposed, all the time, in this role. It’s not just the costume. The Emcee is so.” He draws to a halt, suddenly, not wanting to articulate it.

“Queer? Femme? Over the top?” David raises an eyebrow at him.

“Yeah, I guess.” Patrick sighs. “I—being gay is one thing, and doing . . . all this is another. The big gestures, the movement, the . . . queer stuff. It’s all like trying to speak a foreign language.” He looks up, hoping he hasn’t offended David. “It’s not that—look. I love you. I love how you move in the
world, how you speak, how you walk, how you dress. You’re beautiful. That’s what drew me to you the moment I met you.”

“Oh,” David says, as if he hadn’t realized that before. Patrick would’ve thought it was obvious. Who wouldn’t be drawn to David? He lights up a room. You can’t miss him. Not the way anyone could easily miss Patrick.

“I fell in love with you subsequently,” Patrick clarifies.

David takes his hand and squeezes it. “I get it.”

Taking a shuddery breath, Patrick continues. “But some of the moves your mom has me doing, in the dances, they’re really difficult.”

“I would’ve thought that you’d be able to pick them up, as an athlete. Aren’t you supposed to be light on your feet for baseball or whatever?”

“Did you just call me light on my feet?” Patrick teases, trying to relieve the tension. David just rolls his eyes. “But . . . no. I mean, yes, they’re difficult physically, but they’re also just—not ways my body has ever moved before. In sports, you have to be stable. Solid. You don’t want anyone to be able to knock you over.”

“Well,” David says, slowly, “You should double check with Derrick about this, because I’m not a dancer, but I used to work with a lot of them in my— in my parents’ galleries. And I think what a lot of dancers would say is that it’s really the opposite. It’s a kind of movement that emphasizes vulnerability. It asks people to look at you, and see everything you are. Of course you feel exposed.”

Patrick blinks at him, shocked; he hadn’t thought of it that way at all. All of a sudden he can see the precise shape of his own fear, the hesitation that’s held him back in practice. Queerness and vulnerability, vulnerability and queerness. It echoes through his mind.

David stands and offers his hand to Patrick. Hesitantly, Patrick reaches out and takes it; but David just pulls him up into the same position they were in at the end of his birthday party, draping his arms over Patrick’s shoulders, letting Patrick’s arms slide around his waist. It’s comfortable, and Patrick wants to do this over and over, to get used to the feeling of dancing in David’s arms.

“Now, this kind of dancing,” David intones, “we’re only vulnerable to each other.”

Patrick nods; he can feel it, the way that the intimacy of the position is also there in his willingness to touch, to be touched. But their arms form a barrier around them, protecting them from the outside world. “We can see each other,” he adds. He’s not even sure if that makes sense, but David nods.

“Yeah.” He kisses Patrick’s forehead.

“So you’re telling me I have to be willing to do this, just with a giant room full of people.”

“I believe that my mother’s choreography involves a lot of hip-thrusts? So really it’s doing something a lot dirtier than this with a giant room full of people.”

Patrick laughs, starting to feel the tension drain out of his chest. “Will you show me? How to, how to move?”

“You want dance lessons. From me.” David, who would normally never turn down a chance to be an expert at something, is laughing at the idea. “Better stick with Derrick. I hung up my tap shoes a long time ago.”
“No, no, just. The other things. The freedom of movement thing.”

“You want femme lessons.”

Patrick licks his lips, then nods. David kisses him, and Patrick feels his body relax just knowing he’s here, helping him through this. Patrick kisses back with as much affection as he knows how.

When they break apart, David looks mischievous. “Okay, but for me, you’ll have wear the costume.”

Laughing into David’s shoulder, Patrick sways into their dance.

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It turns out David means it, and so a couple days later Patrick puts on the short pants and sock garters and codpiece-suspenders and crosses the little bowtie over his chest. When he comes out of the bathroom, David whistles.

“Feels like all I do is dress up for you, these days,” Patrick says, the only joke he can think of. He’s trying not to fidget. Mrs Rose taught them that standing square, unmoving, hands at their sides, is one of the most important physical positions in acting. From this position, you can be anyone, she had said. You can rest here. Patrick tries to find it, like they had in rehearsal.

“I’m very okay with that development,” David grins. He stands up and comes over to Patrick. “Can I touch you?”

Patrick looks at him, surprised and grateful to hear the question, like David knows that he needs some boundaries right now. The nervous simmer he’s been feeling starts to melt away.

“Yeah,” he says, swallowing past the tension in his throat. David does, running his hands slowly up Patrick’s bare chest, plucking at the suspenders holding the bowtie in place.

“Well, I don’t know who else will end up seeing it, but I for one am very glad to have been graced by this vision. You look good.” David’s hands skim over his sides, then down so David can tuck his fingertips into Patrick’s pants. “Waist needs some tailoring.”

“Yeah, Shawna wanted me to let her make alterations.”

“And I can’t say I hate this, either.” David’s hand moves to cup his dick, outlined by the suspenders. “How’s it feel?”

“A little . . . tight.” David rubs the heel of his hand against Patrick’s cock. “Kind of a tease, actually.”

“Hmm.”

“So, David?”

“Hmm?”

“You were gonna show me something?” Patrick raises his eyebrows, and David drags his gaze up from Patrick’s crotch to meet his eyes. He purses his lips and takes his hand off of Patrick’s dick.

“Right. Right. Okay. So, take me through the dance.”

“Which one?”

“The first one,” David says.
Patrick does his best, demonstrating and explaining the choreography for “Wilkommen,” taking David through it step by step. David watches, head cocked, nodding occasionally, and Patrick has a weird sudden vision of who he used to be, at his performing arts high school, during his BFA in undergrad, and then later as a gallery owner, watching performances with a trained critical eye. David worked with famous artists and dancers; it makes Patrick feel weird to be hopping around in front of him in sock garters.

“Okay, first of all, this is all extremely cute,” David says, when he finishes, twirling his wrist in Patrick’s general direction. Patrick scowls.

“Thanks,” he says.

“In a good way. I mean, not in a way where your legs are moving . . . much, at all, but it’s still adorable. There were a couple of places where I think we can work. What’s with this shoulder hip ankle move?”

David demonstrates it, and despite never having attempted it before, despite wearing a giant black sweater and being broad-shouldered and generally prone to stomping inelegantly, he looks way more fluid and graceful than Patrick has ever managed.

“It’s the shoulder shoulder hip hip thing,” Patrick moans. “Your mom’s been trying to get me to do that for ages.”

“Okay, first step, definitely forget about my mom.”

Patrick grins. “Okay.”

“Second step. Come here.” David moves so that he’s behind Patrick, wrapping his arms around Patrick’s waist. “Where’s your shoulder now?”

Patrick has to refocus to think about it; his body had moved back to rest against David’s, just out of long habit. “On your chest,” he says.

“Why?”

“Because I wanted to touch you.” He turns his head and looks up at David. “I already know how to do that. Don’t think I need lessons. Unless you have particular complaints.”

“No complaints,” David laughs. “Just—feel it.” He grips the ball of Patrick’s shoulder in his palm, moves it forward and back. “You moved right into me. You can do it with your hip, too.” At that, David moves his hand down Patrick’s side, blunt fingernails brushing his bare skin, and takes ahold of Patrick’s hip, pulling him back so Patrick’s ass is flush up against him.

“So this is gonna help me dance better,” Patrick says, smiling.

David bends and puts his lips to Patrick’s ear. “You already know how to move like this. When you’re comfortable, when you want something badly enough. You move into it.” He moves back, just a little, hands loose on Patrick’s hips. Patrick moves a second later, back to meet him, shoulder and then hip. David kisses the top of his shoulder.

“Do it again,” Patrick says, confused, turned on, suspicious. David does, takes another half-step back, and Patrick finds him again, rolling his shoulder, rolling his hip. It feels good, natural.

“Now do it in place,” David says, still flush up against Patrick, shoulders to knees, his hands tight around Patrick’s waist, his body a warm line keeping Patrick from moving forward or back.

“Yeah.”

He does it again, and then again, envisioning the movement as his body yearning for David, moving to find him. David’s hands stray to his hips again.

“Move with me,” he says, and sways them forward, then around in a long, slow circle, almost a grind. He kisses Patrick’s neck, moves up to bite his earlobe. “Loosen up your spine.”

“I can think of—something else, to loosen up my spine,” Patrick suggests, because he’s not missing how David’s getting hard against his ass.

“You can?”

“I’m just saying, there’s some tension, right now, and I think it could be—” David rolls their hips together again, “—dissipated, if we just—oh, hey.”

He feels it, suddenly, the looseness in his hips, the liquidity in his spine as he and David move together.

“There you go,” David smiles, against his neck. “Just so you know, it’s killing me not to make a Dirty Dancing reference right now.”

“And somehow you managed to make one anyway,” Patrick huffs, amused. “What about the other part, with my hands—there’s a part where they’re above my head—”

“Classic gay, putting your hands above your head while you’re dancing,” David agrees, laughing into his skin. “You had to learn it eventually. Okay. Come here.”

David trails his hands up Patrick’s sides, then up his arms, raising them up in the air. He pauses to caress Patrick’s elbows, and then his wrists, and then his fingers are interlacing with Patrick’s fingers. “Your elbows have movement. Your wrists have movement. Your fingers.” He rolls his hips against Patrick’s again, and this time Patrick doesn’t need any guidance, this time Patrick moves through it with him. David moves their hands together, their wrists, showing Patrick how to extend his fingers, how to move his body freely, all the ways in which he can choose to inhabit space.

“That’s it,” David says, into his ear. “That’s beautiful.”

As they roll and move, as Patrick’s arms move with his spine, with his hips, Patrick feels the tension leaving his body, feels suddenly able to bend and twist along with David. Their arms wave through the air together.

“I—yeah, this is—I can do this,” Patrick says. “I feel this.”

“What do you feel?” David asks, and he sounds a little desperate to know. “Do you feel beautiful?”

Patrick blinks. It’s a hard thought to wrap his mind around. David’s called him that. He’s called David that; David is that, is beautiful, all the time. Moving like this . . . he does feel beautiful. That’s what this feeling is.

“Yeah,” he says, closing his eyes. “I do.”

“Touch yourself,” David says, bringing their arms back down, pressing Patrick’s palms to his own chest. “Touch yourself how I’d touch you, beautiful.”
Patrick does, letting his hands slide down his chest, fingers bumping over his sensitive nipples, then on down his abs and his thighs, one of the moves from this piece he’s been the most nervous about. David shifts their hips at the same time, the movement in counterpoint to Patrick’s slow sensuous touch, and he can feel exactly how it looks, the way it looks free, and gorgeous, and defiant. Like it would never occur to him not to move like that.

“This is—educational,” Patrick says, finding his breath a little short. David’s teeth are back on him, scraping over the back of his neck.

“Is it?” he asks. “Are you learning a lot?”

For answer, Patrick rolls his hips back against David’s. David lets out a little noise, like a groan, or a growl, something full of Rs.

“Pretty sure you already knew how to do that,” David says, brightly, a moment later. Patrick laughs, letting his head and shoulders fall back against him. Then, on a whim, he lifts his arms up over his head, reaching languidly backwards, and sways against him, hips moving lazily from side to side, making his whole body vulnerable, available. David buries his face against Patrick’s neck, lets his arms sweep down over his exposed ribs.


Rather than a grind or a roll, this time David’s hips buck against him, thrust against him, and Patrick opens his eyes again. He’s very interested, very suddenly.

“I love you going all loose and easy for me,” David says, against him. His voice sounds strained. “Fuck. Patrick.”

“You wanna?” Patrick asks, voice as liquid, as soft, as the movements of his body. “Because I kinda want you to slam me up against the wall and do it.”

David moves, a hand on Patrick’s shoulder, the other hand on Patrick’s hip, just like when they started, and then his grip tightens and he does it, presses Patrick up against the wall and follows with his body, pinning Patrick there, rubbing his cock against Patrick’s ass through layers of clothing. He thrusts, and thrusts, and Patrick’s so hard, and Jesus, is David gonna just dry hump him like this? It’s hot to think about, that he got David that turned on, that the way he moved, moved with him, ignited something in him.

He loves it, being that spark, doing something that can make David lose it like this. He loves finding a new way to do it. It’s not a scary thing to do, when he thinks about it like that.

He braces his hands on the wall, closing his eyes as David thrusts messily against him. “Yeah? You gonna do it?”

“Yup, yeah, I absolutely am,” David says, his hands snaking around Patrick’s waist and undoing the button for his pants, fast and efficient. Patrick shrugs out of the suspenders and lets them fall down over his hips, making it possible for David to push the pants down to his knees.

David bites at his earlobe, and then there’s a pause while he moves away to get supplies from the table by the couch.

“Don’t get lube on the costume,” Patrick says.

“Please, I know how to not get lube on a costume,” David replies, laughing. His fingers slide into
Patrick a moment later, slick and sure, spreading him open. Patrick groans and puts his hands up over his head, bracing himself against the wall, leaning back against David, against the place where David is penetrating him.

“That’s—so good,” Patrick manages. “Please.”

“Move your hips for me,” David says. “Give me a little shimmy.”

Patrick laughs, the motion of it shaking his torso, and then he surrenders to the silliness and the sexiness and does it, lets his hips move, shimmies back onto David’s fingers.

“Mmm,” David says, approvingly, a sweet laugh behind it. His other hand braces on Patrick’s shoulder. “I love feeling you move like this.”

“You could be feeling it more,” Patrick suggests.

David lets out a laugh. “You’re such a pushy little bottom,” he says, fucking him a little deeper and rougher with his fingers.

Patrick kind of wants to squirm, turned on, not sure if he’s pleased to be called that. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s a very excellent quality.”

“You know you’re not exactly docile when I top, right?”

“I know if you’re still giving me this much sass I need to fuck you harder.”

“Well, come on, then,” Patrick says, wiggling his hips, groaning and taking it when David goes from two fingers to three. “Yeah,” he says, voice a little broken. “Like that. David. Will you— I wanna feel you, can you—”

“Yeah,” David says, and pulls out long enough to get his clothes off, then presses all up against Patrick, the way he likes, skin to skin. He gets his fingers back inside and Patrick groans involuntarily, pushing back onto him, greedy.

“Love you like this,” David breathes, body flush against Patrick’s left side. Patrick nods, groaning, the pressure inside him building up.

“Yeah,” he manages, eventually. He feels beautiful, sexy, with his pants around his knees, pressed up against this wall, feels like every move he makes is gorgeous.

David makes him feel that way.

“Hang on a second,” David says, and a few seconds later there’s the sound of a condom being opened and the lube bottlecaps clicking and then David’s pushing into him, forcing him to spread his legs wider. When he does, though, he loses a little height, and David has to bend his knees even more to match him. Usually when they do up-against-the-wall, he’s fucking David, and the height difference works perfectly. They’ve done it this way a few times, but Patrick gets the feeling, from David’s dissatisfied hum, that it’s actually not an ideal position for him.

“Do you want, is there a better way to—” Patrick tries rising on his tiptoes, but it’s not quite enough, and hard to hold anyway.

“Can you—you know what. Hang on,” David says, and pulls out for a second before pushing the suspender rig and the pants all the way off Patrick’s legs and shoving the whole mess aside, leaving
him in just socks and sock garters. David’s hands on his shoulders spin him around and then push him back, bracing him against the wall. “C’mere,” David says. “Will you let me try something?”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, breathless. The look on David’s face is shy, wanting, even after all this time. “Baby,” Patrick says, softly. “You can ask me for anything.”

David grins, and takes Patrick’s ass in his hands, lifting him up. “Show me how you can move,” he says, only half a joke.

Patrick does, letting himself be lifted. He starts to wrap his legs around David’s waist, but David shakes his head and urges him higher, so his knees are resting in the crooks of David’s elbows, so David’s holding him up and all he has to do is push back against the wall.

“Jesus,” Patrick says. His whole body is folded in half, thighs almost pressed to his chest, and he grips onto David’s shoulders for stability. When David fumbles one hand down to guide himself back into Patrick’s ass, the angle and the depth of it is . . . something. “Holy Christ,” Patrick pants.

“You like that?” There’s sweat breaking out on David’s forehead, beading, as he holds Patrick in place against the wall.

“Yeah, yeah, it’s—God. You’ve been holding out on me.”

David rocks against him, and Patrick cries out. “Didn’t know if you’d like it this way.”

“I, I like it,” Patrick pants. “You’ve. Wow. You’ve got me.” He leans into it, trusting David to hold him. He feels amazing, suspended like this, body unmoored from gravity. It’s like being tied up, that same gasping freedom.

“I’ve got you,” David agrees, delighted. He rocks his hips again, in and out, and it’s not like he has a lot of leverage to thrust but fuck, he doesn’t need it, because Patrick’s weight and the angle are doing all the work. Each little motion sets off fucking fireworks.

“Feels—so good, David. God. So good.” He moves into David’s rhythm, and the sensation of it is overwhelming, shooting through his nerves, making his cock flush red and hard against his belly.

“Arch your back. Put your hands up. Let me see you,” David says, eyes dark. “I wanna see you.”

Patrick does it, lifting his arms to brace his palms backwards against the wall behind him, letting his shoulders fall back and his hips move forward in a long, arching thrust.

It opens his body to David; it makes him vulnerable.

He turns his head to the side, pressing his cheek to his bicep, and closes his eyes, just letting the pleasure roll through him, letting his body move how it wants, letting David do the work of keeping him up.

“There you are,” David murmurs, kissing his chest, his collarbone. “There you are, look at you. Look at you. You’re beautiful.”


He kisses Patrick’s chest again, softly, then fucks him faster, and a little harder, sweat making his grip slick, making them slip against each other. “Gonna have to—get yourself off,” David says. “Come on. Come all over us.”
Patrick takes one arm down from the wall and opens his eyes again to find David watching him. He licks his hand deliberately, holding eye contact, then starts to jack himself, following the hard, quickening rhythm that David’s set up. After a second it’s clear that it’s not gonna take all that long, with David holding him up and fucking him hard, David’s arms straining under his weight, David’s pink mouth open and panting as he thrusts. Patrick quickens his hand and feels his orgasm rushing through him, overtaking him, rolling along his arms and legs and making his whole body quake. He hears himself make a high, involuntary noise, a shout, a whimper, as the joy of it shudders through him, as he comes all over his belly and chest with the force of it.

“Fuck. Patrick. Fuck.” David’s messy, and sweating, and his pupils are fucking blown, like his body can’t get enough of the sight of him. Patrick’s—he’s too sensitive, now, as David’s cock fucks inside him, and it hurts a little, but he wants it too much to stop him, wants to stay just like this, suspended in David’s arms, open on David’s dick, wants it too much to make him pull out. He thrusts instead, harder, faster, speeding them up, taking it the way he wants it. It hurts, and it feels weird, and he loves it, and he wants it.

“Yeah. Fuck me, David. God, you fuck me so good, you made me come all over myself, look at me, look what you did to me—”

David shudders, his arms trembling under Patrick’s weight, and for a second Patrick’s worried he’s going to drop him, but then he just buries his head against Patrick’s chest, opens his mouth against Patrick’s pec, and moans and grips Patrick’s legs and comes.

“Patrick. Holy fuck.” David’s chest is heaving and his head is still against Patrick’s chest and his dick is still deep in Patrick’s ass. Patrick laughs, belly laughs, and it sends more reverberations through their bodies, making his ass twinge again.

“You’ve got come in your hair,” he points out, which makes David huff a laugh of his own around his panting breaths. “Come on, let me down before you sprain something.”

“Didn’t hear any concerns for my health during the fucking part,” David points out, but he helps Patrick unfold and get his feet back on the ground. His muscles scream an objection as they’re let out of the position, but Patrick doesn’t care; his skin is still fucking buzzing.

“You seemed to know what you wanted,” Patrick points out. “Ow, ow.”

“You okay?”

Patrick kisses him. “Wouldn’t change a thing,” he says, breathy, smiling.

David’s face sort of goes soft. “God. You’re so much fun to fuck.”

This draws a laugh and a blush from Patrick. “What?”

“You’re just—fucking you is so much fun. It’s true!” David smiles, defending himself, as Patrick laughs more, then he leans in and kisses him to get him to stop. “And sometimes,” he says, millimetres away, “sometimes you let yourself really . . . lose control, and when you do.” He shakes his head. “It’s like watching a fucking supernova.”

Patrick isn’t laughing anymore, but he’s still blushing, pleased, surprised. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. Give an audience one tenth of that, one one hundredth of that, and you’ll be luminous.”

“Luminous.” Patrick wants to doubt it. He’s having trouble, though.
David kisses his neck. “You heard me.”

The Emcee moves like he’s beautiful, and desirable, touches himself like he knows everyone in the room wants to touch him. He lets his body move the way it wants, not the way it’s supposed to, and he gets to be feminine, and masculine, as it suits him. He makes himself vulnerable, in front of an audience, and he feels good doing it.

Maybe Patrick can do that too, a little.

*

It’s Patrick’s Sunday afternoon off, something he’s still getting used to since they hired Gabe. He was thinking about getting some chores done, but when he got home he found himself instead sitting on his bed, holding the engagement rings in his hand, running his fingers over them and wondering when and how he can get David up the mountain with him to propose. He’s thinking about suggesting a picnic, since the cheese is likely to get David on board, but he’s not sure how to sell the hike. He wants, so badly, to do it, but he wants it to be perfect, too. He’s caught in indecision, trying to see his way through the steps. He needs a list, maybe.

While he’s pondering, he gets a text from Joon-ho with red klaxxons and the words NINE ONE ONE in all caps. Patrick hopes that in a real medical emergency Joon-ho would forgo the emojis and use numbers instead of letters, and also that he’d actually call for an ambulance instead of texting anyone, so he’s not too concerned, just curious.

**Patrick:** What’s up

**Joon-ho:** My sister’s visiting me

**Patrick:** Your little sister? Who you like? And always say you miss?

**Joon-ho:** Yeah. I invited her to come see me and she took me up on it

**Patrick:** Well, yeah, I see the emergency then

**Joon-ho:** I know you think you’re funny but it means I have to introduce her to Ray

Patrick swallows hard.

**Patrick:** You don’t have to. If you don’t want to.

**Joon-ho:** That’s nice but like. So I made this deal with myself?? That if any of my family actually came to visit and take a real interest in my life, then I’d be real with them. She’s got a couple days before she goes back to Queens for the fall semester and she took a bus all the way here so we are DOING THIS

**Patrick:** So what’s the 911

**Joon-ho:** I texted Ray that we’re coming over but I think he’s freaking out and I need you to go and talk him down. Also please make sure he doesn’t have sweat stains on his shirt or anything

Laughing, Patrick shakes his head.

**Patrick:** You got it

*
He kind of thought that Joon-ho was giving Ray too little credit, but Patrick does find him pacing back and forth in the living room, which can’t be a good sign.

“Okay, Ray, slow down,” Patrick says. “We’ve got some time. Talk to me.”

He’s glad they’ve got time, because something horrifying has happened to Ray’s hair that Patrick doesn’t even know how to identify.

“The little sister is the gateway to the parents,” Ray says, talking fast. Patrick has never seen him this unhappy before. His shoulders are tight. “And the parents are, well, the parents.”

“I know,” Patrick says, gently.

“I know you know, Patrick, thank you. But this is a little different. David’s entire family loves you. You’re a successful businessman.”

“Ray. You’re a successful businessman.”

“Joon-ho’s little sister is studying at Queen’s. Their parents are doctors.”

“Ray. Your parents are doctors.”

“So at least you understand the problem, then,” Ray mutters, sighing and collapsing down onto the couch. Patrick’s not sure he does, but he’s here, and his friend is counting on him, so he’s going to try. He sits down next to Ray and pats him gingerly on the shoulder.

“Since when do you care what other people think?” he asks.

“Oh, I don’t know, Patrick, maybe since you convinced us to take this relationship seriously, and then we both got really invested, and now I might lose someone important to me!”

“Me? How is this my fault?” Patrick objects.

“I can’t believe you believed in us,” Ray says, scathingly. “It was very unkind.”

“Noted,” Patrick says, trying not to laugh. “Never support your friends’ relationships, especially when it might make them happy.”

“I was happy,” Ray sighs. “It was nice, for a while.”

“Now you’re just being dramatic. Joon-ho isn’t going to break up with you if his sister disapproves of you.”

“So you think she’s going to disapprove of me.”

“Joon-ho’s sister isn’t going to disapprove of you,” Patrick says, measured. “So let’s focus on making a good impression. What’d you do to your hair, there, buddy?”

“I used some product,” he says. He runs a hand through it, and grimaces when it comes out greasy, rubbing his fingers together. “Is it not working?”

“Go take a shower, and we’ll start over.”

He texts David to let him know he’ll be late getting home, and when David texts back question marks, ends up explaining the situation a little. Then he texts with Joon-ho a little more, getting an update on their plans and ETA, and by the time he gets done with that, Ray’s back out of the
“Okay, so, you’re going to dinner in Elmdale, right? What’re you wearing?”

Ray glances down at the khakis and polo shirt he has on. “I thought, keep it casual? I don’t want her to think I’m too old.”

Patrick hesitates. It seems wrong to him, but maybe it’s the better idea, to dress down. “I don’t know,” he says.

There’s a sudden knock at the door, and Ray jumps. “Relax,” Patrick says, “it’s not them, I just texted Joon-ho and they’re an hour away.” He goes to answer it, still on autopilot from when he used to live here, and is surprised to see David when he opens the door.

“Hi,” he says, as David breezes in past him, holding a bag in his hands. “What’re you doing here?”

David rolls his eyes back, smiling, and says, “Well. I heard there was a fashion emergency.”

Patrick kisses him, and doesn’t bother stopping when Ray comes to see who it is.

David’s considered opinion is that Ray should try to look mature and successful, with more of what he calls a dad vibe, rather than trying to pretend he’s younger than he is.

“That would be skeevy,” David pronounces. “Patrick, I can’t believe you would’ve let Ray make the skeevy choice.”

“I guess we’re just lucky you showed up, then,” Patrick smiles.

David sends Ray to his closet for suits, pulls what turn out to be some of Patrick’s shirts out from the bag he brought, and throws together a couple outfits before sending Ray off to change.

“You know, it really doesn’t matter what he wears,” Patrick says. “She’s either gonna love him because her brother does, or she’s not.”

Shrugging, David smiles shyly. “I thought a lot about what to wear, when I was about to meet your parents,” he says, softly.

“You did?” Patrick finds himself smiling back.

“Yeah, and then I just went with my regular outfit for the day, because, fuck it, this was the package they were gonna get.”

“It’s a great package,” Patrick says, and kisses him while he smiles.

“You’re right, it’s not really about what he’s wearing. All his suits are terrible. It’s about making him feel confident.”

Patrick stares at him, startled by this insight, but only gets a second to do it before Ray comes out of the bedroom. He’s in one of his own suits and one of Patrick’s shirts, and does a little twirl for them.

“Not bad,” Patrick says. He kind of means it; Patrick’s shirt fits him better than his own usually do, and it makes him look more put-together, even a little sexy. In a dad vibe way.

“Tie or no tie, gentlemen?”

“No tie,” David says, definitively. “And undo one more button.”
Ray does, exposing just a little chest hair, and David nods.

“She’ll love you,” he says. “She’ll be jealous she’s not the one dating you.”

This cheers Ray up to no end. Sighing happily, he goes to comb his hair back down into its regular configuration. Patrick stares at David.

“That was really nice of you,” he says.

“Mmm, was it?”

“It was. Thank you for helping today.”

“Well. You know. Anything for the community.”

*

He texts Joon-ho later that night.

Patrick: So??? How did it go?

Joon-ho: Good, I think! Ray babbled a lot but Amy needs to get used to that, and Amy made us drive to three different restaurants before we could settle on one, but Ray needs to get used to that

Patrick: That sounds sweet actually

Joon-ho No it was embarrassing
Joon-ho They’re both so embarrassing
Joon-ho I love them both so much Patrick it’s ridiculous

Patrick sends a heart emoji, because he knows what it feels like to have the people you love meet each other for the first time.

Patrick: Did she say anything to you after?

Joon-ho Kinda, we didn’t talk for long? But she said she liked Ray and she gave me a big hug and we talked a little about breaking the news to Mom and Dad

Patrick: That sounds great!

Joon-ho: Yeah
Joon-ho: there was this other thing tho
Joon-ho: I was gonna ask you a favour

Patrick: Is it crime

Joon-ho: It is kind of a heist? A heist of my sister’s good opinion, that is

Patrick: lol ok lay it on me, you know I was born for this

Joon-ho: ok so. here’s the thing.

*

By design, Patrick and David run into Joon-ho and his sister the next morning at the café. It was
work to get David here by the appointed hour, but Patrick’s pretty proud of his early morning blowjob skills by this point.

“Hey, Patrick! And David!” Joon-ho says, cheerful and a little too loud. “Meet my sister, Amy.” He turns to her and adds, “They’re good friends of mine.”

“Nice to meet you,” Amy says, holding out her hand for them to shake. She has a firm grip, Patrick notices.

“You too, we’ve heard a lot about you,” Patrick says. “Your brother said you were at Queen’s?”

“Chemical engineering,” she agrees.

“She’s the good one,” Joon-ho smiles, and Patrick gets the sense that it’s an old joke. Amy doesn’t laugh at it.

“Yeah, in the sense that I actually like hard science, so I didn’t have to run away to pursue my dream and find true love like my big brother,” she says, rolling her eyes. Joon-ho looks pleased, and abashed.

“Joon-ho is one of the reasons that David and I got together,” Patrick says, taking David’s hand. David gives him a quizzical eyebrow, but goes along with it. “He’s a good listener.”

“He better be, with all those linguistics courses,” Amy says.

Joon-ho sighs. “That’s still not what linguistics is.”

David kind of thumb-wrestles him for control of their handholding, but Patrick wins out and stills David’s curious, annoying fingers in a firm grip.

“Well, come visit more often, and I’ll learn more about linguistics,” Amy shoots back. Joon-ho rolls his eyes.

“I think that’s our fault, Amy,” Patrick says, trying to remember all those lessons he took on how to be a good actor, and failing. This performance doesn’t bode well for *Cabaret*. “Your brother is pretty beloved around here. He’s a fixture at all the queer games nights and parties. He just knows we’d all miss him if he were gone.”

Amy smiles, surprised. “Oh! That’s nice to hear. Not really what you expect, from a town like this.”

“Oh, I’ve always felt very supported, around here,” Patrick says. “As a gay man.”

Patrick ignores the distressed noise that emerges from David’s throat, hoping that if he pretends it’s not there, Amy won’t notice it either.

“That’s a relief. You know, even down in Kingston, I just don’t know that there’s a good support network.”

Patrick nods. “You have to work on it. But sometimes small town togetherness is good for something.”

“Huh,” Amy says.

“Joon-ho, your order’s up,” Twyla calls, from the counter.

“Oh, that’s us,” Joon-ho says.
“Nice to meet you,” Amy says, politely. Patrick and David echo it back to her.

“Thanks, Patrick,” Joon-ho says, in an undertone.

After they leave, David slides his hand back slowly to his side of the table, giving him his suspicious face. Patrick loves that face.

“Yes?” he asks.

“What was he thanking you for, Patrick?” David asks, brightly, suppressing a laugh. “And also what the fuck was all of that?”

Patrick shrugs, like it’s no big deal. “Joon-ho texted me that Amy’s concerned he doesn’t have enough supportive community around here. He asked me to be gay in front of her, so she doesn’t worry so much. It’s sweet.”

“So you just—performed homosexuality for a friend’s sister,” David says, waving his hand, grin breaking out all over his face. “Using me for a *prop.*”

“A very cute prop,” Patrick corrects him. “You wanna split my omelette and give me half your pancakes?”

“Yes,” David says, picking Patrick’s hand up again, interlacing their fingers. “Sure.”

That night, Patrick gets out the rings again, runs his fingers over them again. He thinks about David, showing up with fashion advice to calm Ray down; he thinks about Joon-ho, keeping a promise with himself to be real with his family. He thinks about Gabe, too, coming out to his bosses. Next time he and David have the time to do it, he’s going to take him up a mountain and tell him he wants to stay together forever.

* Rehearsal gets in the way, though, and the store gets in the way; Patrick finds himself annoyingly overscheduled, so he and David don’t have any daylight hours off together. They steal time, kisses, teasing conversations, but it’s a little like when they were first together, trying to find spaces to have sex. Except it’s trying to find time to make a lifelong commitment.

When Patrick’s about to leave the store to go to the next secret dance rehearsal with Derrick and Stevie, David grabs his hand.

“Remember,” he says, and pulls Patrick back against him, shoulder and hip. Patrick grins and shimmies back, pushing his ass against him.

“You remember,” he says. David laughs.

Patrick thinks: *I really need to find a way to marry this man.*

David’s method works, though; even Derrick notices.

“Whatever you’re doing, keep it up,” he says, approvingly. They work on the Money number again, and while they still don’t quite nail the final lift, at least Patrick feels comfortable doing it. Thanks to David, he thinks he might even feel comfortable doing it in his costume, the next time.

* When he tells Mrs Rose that, at the next official rehearsal, she beams at him.
“I have some conditions,” he warns her.

“Oh, naturally you do. You are turning into quite the diva, Patrick.” She winks. “That’s a
compliment.”

“Okay,” Patrick laughs. He can live with that.

* *

Rehearsals fly by, and it seems like no time at all before they’re a week out from the production.
While Mrs Rose and Jocelyn deal with tech issues in the theatre space, they assign the cast to work
on makeup. Which is how Patrick ends up in David and Alexis’s room, sitting down at the little
table, staring apprehensively at the literal suitcase of makeup laid out for him.

“I have no idea how you’re going to do this for the actual show, Alexis,” he says, to make
conversation. “Don’t you also need to get into costume and makeup?”

“Um, I’m just helping Alyssa to craft the looks? Then we’ll take pictures and she’ll put you in
makeup for the actual performance. She came on kind of late and does not have time to do it all, so I
said I’d help out.”

“That’s very generous,” Patrick says. Alexis blinks cheerfully at him, wrinkling up her nose and
smiling.

“Well, naturally,” she says. “Now, okay, if you want to like, rub your eyes or scratch your nose, now
is the time to do it, because we are doing full face with you.”

Patrick didn’t need to do either of those things until she mentioned them, but now he does, so he rubs
his whole face just to be sure. Alexis starts doing things with sponges and brushes that he doesn’t
understand, and he tries to sit still for it.

“Have you ever like, worn makeup before?”

“Just for other theatre things,” Patrick says. “Not for fun.”

Alexis tsks. “So many good-looking men out there missing out,” she says. Patrick smiles, and she
draws back. “No, don’t do that,” she says, severely, and Patrick schools his face back to neutral.

“What about you?” he asks, trying to move his lips as little as possible. “Have you done a lot of stage
makeup before?”

She tilts her head from side to side in a sort-of gesture. “A little stage makeup, yeah. Occasionally
disguises, like, giving myself gross scars so I wouldn’t be recognized as I escaped from this gun-
runner’s mansion in Belgium or whatever. And on boyfriends, of course.”

“Yeah? You put your boyfriends in makeup?” Patrick suddenly wants to know, wants to see pictures
of what Alexis had done to those men.

She gives him one of her ridiculous winks. “Boys love it. Not to be gross, but like, the sex is
amazing if you put a little lipstick on them first.” She looks away from his forehead, where she was
doing something, and back down to meet his eyes. “Sorry, was that too gross? I don’t know what
like. Stage of the relationship you and David are at.”

Patrick thinks about how, if things go to plan, she’s going to be his sister-in-law. It makes him feel
full of warmth, soft inside, to dwell on that. His sister-in-law. He wonders if Alexis will like Hallie
and Victoria, if they’ll like her.

“You’re asking if David and I are at the stage of our relationship where I talk about sex tips with his sister?” Patrick asks, trying to keep the laugh inside his chest so it doesn’t move his face. “Because I think David would—oh.” He’s interrupted mid-sentence by the motel door opening and David coming in.

“Hello,” David says, obviously surprised to see him. “David would what?”

“Patrick and I were just exchanging sex tips, David,” Alexis purrs, which makes David sputter. “Well that is wildly inappropriate,” he says, coming in and dropping his bag. “Patrick, have you no decency?”

“You’re the one who encouraged me to wear the crotch-suspenders,” Patrick says. “I think decency was left behind a few turns back.”

David comes towards him, then hesitates.

“Oh, go on, I haven’t done his mouth yet,” Alexis sighs, and then David leans in and kisses him hello.

“Hi,” Patrick says. “We weren’t really discussing sex tips.”

“Patrick’s never worn makeup off-stage,” Alexis says.

“That does not surprise me,” David smiles, sitting down on Alexis’s bed and crossing his legs, knee over knee, watching the process. “Patrick, if you do decide to start wearing makeup, I’d suggest avoiding this particular look. Making you paler is not the best idea.”

“Oh, having birthday clown flashbacks?” Patrick asks.

“Shockingly, no,” David says, “but we’ll see if I run screaming when Alexis does the lipstick and eyeshadow.”

“I’m not making him look like a clown, David, jeez. Give me more credit than that.” She does start doing Patrick’s lips, then, and it’s a lot more steps than Patrick thought it would be, with various different containers of stuff.

“I don’t like the part where I can’t kiss him now, though,” David says.

“Actually? With this product you could kiss him all day and not smudge it up. Well. Maybe not all day. But still. A lil smooch.”

“You look good with the red lip,” David says, consideringly. “It’s pretty.”

“Yeah?” He hopes he’s not blushing; he thinks Alexis could tell, at this distance, even under the white makeup.

“It’s okay to want to look pretty, Patrick,” Alexis says, severely.

“I think I prefer to look handsome, most of the time.” He darts his gaze to David. “This is just for special occasions.”

“There’s no need to be nervous,” David says. “I mean, you’re already going to rehearsal all the time dressed like Alan Cumming—”
“That’s not true, you know that I argued your mother into letting me wear an undershirt—”

“Yes, and it was an entire week that I spent having to listen to my mother talk about how beautiful your chest is, and while . . . okay, she made some good points and I do not technically disagree with her, it was traumatic and I was very glad when it was over.”

Patrick laughs, making Alexis look annoyed at him again. “Sorry,” he says to her. “And I’m sorry you went through such a terrible trauma, David.”


“Eyes closed,” Alexis says. Patrick closes his eyes, and she does something to them.

He hears a door opening, and then Mr Rose’s voice. “Alexis, have you seen—oh, hello, Patrick.”

“Hi, Mr Rose,” Patrick says, still with his eyes closed. “Sorry I can’t get up. Alexis is crafting my look.” He says it just precisely enough to be teasing, and it earns him a half-hearted slap on the arm from Alexis.

*Sister-in-law, Patrick thinks. Father-in-law.*

“Oh, this is for the, for the show,” Mr Rose says, after a minute.

“No, Dad, Alexis is covering Patrick in white facepaint to wear to the Wobbly Elm.” Patrick can hear David’s eyeroll.

“Well, how should I know?” There’s the sound of footsteps, Mr Rose coming around to face Patrick, presumably. “Oh, hey, that looks pretty good, Alexis!”

“Um, thank you,” Alexis says, clearly nonplussed by the surprise in her father’s voice. “It’s not like I once disguised Bradley Cooper as a washer-woman to get us past a police stop in Switzerland.” While Mr Rose sputters at that, Alexis talks over him. “Okay, open your eyes and look up. And trust me.”

“I do,” Patrick says, shooting her an amused glance as he follows her instructions. She looks pleased. Then she gets really, really close to his eyeball with various implements, and he has to work hard not to flinch.

“Show’s coming up soon, huh,” Mr Rose asks.

“Friday,” Patrick confirms.

“Dad, you have tickets,” Alexis grouses. “You should know when the show is.”

“Well, it’s good to double-check. You know your mother is very excited about it. I think she’s had a lot of fun working with you two, and with Stevie too.”

“It’s fun to work with her,” Patrick says, meaning it.

“When I’m not having flashbacks to her being our manager, back when we were child actors,” Alexis says, which makes David grin.

“I’m pretty sure she’s mellowed out since then,” he says. Alexis chuckles.

“She’d have to, right?”
“You kids were so cute back then. Remember the commercial for Rose Video that you did?”

“Ew,” David says, severely.

“Ew, Dad, we tried to forget that.”

“I, for one, would like to see a copy,” Patrick puts in. David narrows his eyes at him.

“I’ll have to dig one up,” Mr Rose says. “Or it might be on the YouTube.”

Patrick grins, winks at David and Alexis. “We’ll check the YouTube for sure.” They both suppress a grin in exactly the same way, the way they do when they’re teasing their dad together, and it makes Patrick’s heart ache happily, to be a part of it.

Mr Rose shakes his head. “Okay. I better get back to it. Alexis, have you seen my phone charger?”

“No,” Alexis says.

“Maybe it’s in my briefcase,” Mr Rose mutters, patting his pockets as if he’ll find a phone charger in them, then starts walking back towards his room. As he passes, he squeeze Patrick’s shoulder.

“Well. Good luck in the show, son. Break a leg.”

David and Alexis both go wide-eyed, staring after Mr Rose, and then staring at Patrick, and then staring at each other.

“What?” Patrick asks.

“Um. He only ever calls David that,” Alexis says, shimmying in her chair and grinning.

“Was it a big deal?” Patrick glances over his shoulder. “I don’t think he even noticed.”

“He didn’t,” David says, slowly. He meets Patrick’s eyes, and a shy smile starts to break over his face.

“Huh,” Patrick says, and smiles back.

“Okay, not to interrupt you two being goopy, but I think I am done,” Alexis says, and grabs a mirror to show him.

Patrick finds, to his surprise, that he does look . . . kinda pretty, his eyes and his lips standing out from the paleness of his face, which isn’t as white as he feared it would be. It’s a little rough, a little smeary in places, like the man wearing it has had a hard day, or a hard year. Maybe like it’s yesterday’s makeup, or like he got fucked in it before he got on stage.

“I like it,” he says. “It works.”


“Thank you,” Alexis preens. “We’ll take some pictures and then I’ll show you how to take it off without, like, destroying your skin.”

They do that, but even with the makeup remover, his eyes still kind of stand out, like just a little eyeliner is left over, and it keeps catching his glance in the mirror. It’s not—he doesn’t think it’s something he’d want to do day to day, but it’s kind of fun to see, a version of himself that would stand out in a crowd.
“Aw, not pretty anymore,” David pouts, when he and Alexis come out of the bathroom.

“Excuse me,” Patrick protests, grinning. “You coming back to my place tonight? Or am I not pretty enough?”

“I would like that, yes,” David says, smiling like he does every time Patrick invites him, like Patrick hadn’t given him a key months ago. Patrick loves him.

“Thanks, Alexis,” Patrick says, and to his surprise Alexis leans in and kisses his cheek, first the right, then the left. He kisses her back, pleased.

“See you at dress rehearsal,” she says.

David takes his hand as they walk towards Patrick’s car. Patrick swings it between them, making a decision. He doesn’t want to wait, anymore.

“Since the show’s opening on Friday, I was thinking we should do date night on Thursday,” he says, slowly.

“That sounds fine,” David agrees. “What should we do?”

“I was thinking, What would you say to a romantic picnic? We can go for lunch. Gabe can cover the afternoon.”

“So long as the mosquitos don’t get us,” David says, but he’s smiling, clearly already liking the idea.

“They won’t,” Patrick says. “It’ll be perfect.”

* 

The proposal is very far from perfect. In the end, though, it is pretty fucking romantic, just not in the way Patrick expected. Typical, for his carefully laid out plans to all go off the rails. It makes him frustrated and angry, for a lot of the day, but by the time David’s piggybacking him up his favourite trail, literally carrying him to the place where Patrick figured himself out, amusement and exasperation are starting to win out over annoyance.

It only takes a little kind, helpful prodding from David to get him to go through with it after all. It reminds Patrick, ruefully, of their first kiss, how Patrick made a plan and stumbled right before the finish line, how David saw it and understood it and took them the rest of the way.

They’re a good team. Maybe that’s more romantic than a flawlessly executed proposal. It might even be more romantic than David never whining or bickering, more romantic than Patrick never letting himself get annoyed and angry when a plan doesn’t go perfectly. The romantic part is, they have each other to rely on when they . . . kind of suck.

So he gets down on one knee, and he meets David’s eyes, and he tells him the story of himself, the story of himself in this place, the most important of the stories that he has left to tell him. This is me, he tries to say, here on this rocky outcropping where he let himself breathe freely for the first time in his life. This is how I found my way to you. He gives David that story, because he wants David to have it, to know everything about him.

David says yes, and after a couple minutes they end up sitting on the blanket together, wriggling around to avoid the pointy rocks, trying to kiss and mostly crying on each other instead.

“Hell of a way to start our lives together,” Patrick laughs, over a little sob, when he has to wipe his
own snot off of David’s face. David loses it, burying his face against Patrick’s chest, shoulders shaking.

“I think it’s perfect,” David says, voice muffled. “I think we deserve each other.”

Patrick strokes his shoulders. “Maybe we do,” he says.

“You’re the love of my life too, you know,” David adds, sniffling. He’s getting Patrick’s hoodie wet.

“I know,” Patrick says, because he does. He knows that, now.

“So,” David looks up to meet Patricks’ eyes, wiping his face with his hand. “What’s going on with that cheese?”

* 

When they fuck that night, it’s different, full of bubbly champagne joy, but also a deeper, thrumming energy that Patrick can’t get enough of: he looks David in the eyes while he rocks in and out of him, thinking: *I get to have him for the rest of my life.* They fuck slow and languorously, all of it familiar: their pace and their kisses and the sounds of their voices, rising together. Their hands clench on each other’s skin and their breath is hot and the warmth of the day coming in through the window makes them sweat, makes them sticky and messy and like one body, pressed together to create one gasping, arching moment of pleasure together. As he comes, Patrick thinks: *I get to have what I want.*

After, they shower to cool off and clean up, and David kisses him amidst the falling water.

“Forever,” he says, in a wondering tone. “How can you possibly plan to be with me forever.”

“We’ll get an RRSP together,” Patrick jokes, and kisses him back. “It’s not hard.”

David’s hands follow the trails of water over his body, spanning his shoulders and pecs, his belly, cupping his ass, sliding back up his thighs, all of him, all of him. “I think . . . it is,” David says, slowly. “I think it is hard to do. Hard to get here.”

It was hard for David, Patrick knows that, and it was hard for him, too. He steps a little closer, pressing his forehead against David’s shoulder, letting the water sluice over them.

“Yeah,” he says, eventually. The water starts to turn cold—one of Patrick’s least favourite things about this apartment, and the reason they don’t do this more often—and he bends down to shut it off.

He grabs the big, fluffy bathtowel off of the wall hook and wraps it around David, over his head so it looks like a hood with David’s face peeking out. With his hair flat, David looks vulnerable, a version of himself he only lets Patrick see.

“I meant it,” Patrick says, using the edges of the towel to carefully pat the moisture off of David’s face, the way he prefers. David blinks at him like a YouTube video of an owl getting a bath. “Easiest decision of my life.”

* 

While David’s running errands the next day—and, Patrick suspects, gossiping with Stevie about the proposal, there’s no way he could keep this news from her for more than five minutes—Patrick staffs the store with Gabe.

“All ready for your big debut, Mr Brewer?” Gabe asks him, in the morning, with a grin that makes
Patrick narrowed his eyes at him.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going,” Patrick says.

“I am definitely going,” Gabe replies. “My friend Alex is really into musicals, so we’re going together.”

“Alex?” Patrick asks.

Gabe kind of blushes and then shakes his head, so Patrick doesn’t get anymore info on that, even about the gender of the Alex in question.

“Well. I think I’m ready,” he says. “I won’t lie, it’s a little outside my comfort zone. Especially the costume. You may see things you cannot unsee.”

“I’m pretty tough,” Gabe laughs. “But seriously, lots of people have been coming in here asking about it. Asking what role you’re playing. I think everyone’s excited.”

“Really?” Patrick asks. It’s a nice thought, that so many people in the community know him and are rooting for him.

Gabe nods. “So there are lots of people to disappoint if you mess it up,” he says.

“Thank you, Gabe. Remind me why I took you in and gave you a job again?”

“Because I impressed you with my can-do attitude,” Gabe grins. “And by like. Being a criminal.”

“That was it.” Patrick starts rearranging the honey display, then frowns at it and starts putting it back the way it was. Did the previous configuration make more sense? He wants to sell more of the basswood ones.

“Don’t be nervous,” Gabe says, after a minute or two. “I’m sure you’ll be... really great.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” Patrick takes a deep breath and leaves the honey alone; if Gabe feels the need to reassure him, he must be pretty obviously messed up. He walks over to the counter, where Gabe is doing something on his phone.

“How are the plans for your event coming along?” he asks.

Gabe grins. “I’m working on it right now. Okay, hear me out: I was thinking: queer fashion show.”

Patrick laughs. “Wow.”

“It’s good, eh?”

“It kind of is,” Patrick agrees.

“And it might draw a younger crowd. Including people who don’t, like, people who don’t identify as, whatever, or people who aren’t out. Anyway. What do you think?”

“I think... we should see if we can get Ronnie into a top hat,” Patrick says, starting to picture it. “And I think David’s gonna be really torn about whether to love it or hate it. Tell me more. What’s the merchandising angle?”

*
For whatever reason, working through the details of Gabe’s plan with him calms Patrick’s nerves just enough for him to remember all the practices with Derrick, all of the coaching from Mrs Rose, and to remember David’s lesson, about letting his body move with openness, and desire. After a while, he finds himself humming, a little, and then, while he’s reshelving some product in the backroom, he even starts dancing.

“Lookin’ good, Mr Brewer,” Gabe says, laughing, when he comes in, and Patrick’s first instinct is to stop, and be embarrassed, but what the hell, if he can’t do it in front of one teenager, how will he do it in front of the whole town?

“Thanks,” Patrick says, and throws himself into a couple more moves, spinning around.

Gabe snorts a laugh. “It’s good that you’re having fun.”

“You know what?” Patrick agrees, transitioning into some of his moves from the Money number, “I agree.”

* 

Throughout the day, David texts him apologetically with details of how their big engagement announcement is going increasingly off the rails, and Patrick wants to be annoyed, but his mind is preoccupied with the show, and Stevie’s disappearance, and anyway it all sounds like such a ridiculous comedy of errors that he can’t quite bring himself to get worked up about it.

He doesn’t care that much about the announcement, really; it’s just nice that people know. Though he could do without having to say thank you, yes, thanks, very happy, yes every five seconds while he’s trying to get his costume on and get ready.

Ray comes up to him while he’s doing the stretches that Derrick insisted they do.

“Patrick! I was told to tell you that they’re ready for you in makeup. By which I mean, Alyssa is ready for you, since she’s the entire makeup department.”

“Thanks, Ray. Hey, you look good.”

Ray smiles, shaking out his sleeves. The arm garters kind of suit him. “I love costumes!” he says. “There really is something to it, becoming someone else for a night.”

“There is,” Patrick agrees. He smiles, thinking about it, about what this role gives him permission to try. He’s actually . . . really excited for it, to try it in front of people. He hopes like hell that Stevie gets here in time for them to actually put on the show.

“Also, I can’t help but add: I heard the good news about you and David! Congratulations!”

“Thanks,” Patrick says, sighing. “We’re really happy about it.”

“You should be! I remember back when you had such a crush on him, and didn’t do anything about it for weeks.” Ray waves his hands. “It was cute but also, if I’m being honest, Patrick? A little bit painful to watch.”

Patrick can’t help but laugh at that. “Well. It was cute and painful from the inside, too,” he says. Ray nods, then makes as if to go. “Hey,” Patrick says, stopping him.

Ray turns back and looks up at him, curiously.
“Thanks for being there, for me. Back then. You’re a good friend.”

“Patrick.” Ray’s shoulders slump and his face softens. “I would hug you, but I’m already in makeup.”

“Take it as read,” Patrick says, holding up a hand. “Hug received.”

“Good,” Ray says. “Bring David over to dinner sometime soon, okay? We’ll get a few people together and toast your happy news.”

“That sounds great,” Patrick says.

* 

“You ready for this?” Stevie asks him, backstage, as the house lights go down and a hush falls over the audience.

“Are you?”

She grins at him, and he grins back, wild and manic. There’s an energy between them, around them, that he can’t quite name. But it feels good, like nervousness and excitement and joy and freedom all buzzing through the air, lifting them up with it. He doesn’t know how the show is going to go, but he can’t wait to see what happens when that precarious potential energy, balanced on a knife’s edge, snaps into motion.

“Just don’t step on my foot, Brewer.”

“Don’t headbutt me in the stomach.”

Stevie nods. “Deal.”

They fistbump. It’s done.

* 

Patrick strides out on stage, and lets himself be the Emcee: confident. Sexy. Strange. Indefinably queer. He keeps his shoulders back, lets his hips move freely, and he feels it in every step that Derrick drilled into him, in every swirl that lets his coat flow out behind him, in every glance he throws into the audience, like Mrs Rose taught him. He can feel it, the moment he nails the little shoulder-shoulder-hip-hip thing that David helped him work on, can feel the way it makes him feel open and soft and powerful, all at the same time.

_Legs like tree trunks_, David had said, and okay, that might be true, but he expresses himself with his hands and his fingers, and he sways with his hips, and he runs his hands over his body like he’s the hottest shit anyone’s ever seen, and he feels good. He feels like he loses himself, a little, in that moment, like there’s just this glorious performance, this surface, and he doesn’t have to exist for it; he lets his body do what he’s been training it to do, what he’s been giving it permission to do, and inside his sexy costume and his just-been-fucked makeup and carefully choreographed dance steps he feels the way he does when David ties him up, when David held him up against the wall: he feels free.

The other thing is, and Patrick didn’t really anticipate it, but: it’s _fun_. As the show continues, he makes faces, waves at the audience, peeks out from behind scenery, and it’s silly and irreverent and he likes it.

The crowd cheers him on, applauds when they see him, and that feels good, like he’s creating
something in real time, with them, like he’s making them feel what they’re making him feel, back
and forth in a circuit. Mrs Rose was right: the Emcee is in love with the audience, and so is Patrick.

When the show comes down towards the end, as it gets darker and more violent, as the laughter in
the crowd subsides, Patrick lets that energy carry him, too. He sheds his coat, down to just his
undershirt and trousers, and comes out on the bare stage for “I Don’t Care Much.” There isn’t
choreography for this one, just him in front of the microphone, but he lets himself feel it physically,
anyway. In that moment, for that song, he lets his body remember all the things he’s managed to
forget throughout the evening’s performance: tension, and restriction, and fear. As he sings, his
shoulders curl forward; his hands stop expressing, and start clenching the microphone stand; his face
sets in a hard line; and his hips square off, all the shimmy gone, evaporated.

The position is a costume, just another costume, but it’s one he used to wear pretty successfully, and
he knows exactly how binding it feels. He stills his body, makes it tense, and pours all of the emotion
into the lyrics instead: *So if you kiss me, if we touch: warning’s fair; I don’t care very much.*

The point of the song, of course, is that he does care, but also that he can’t afford to. That there isn’t
time, or space, for love, when the world is falling down around you; that living without freedom
from violence, that living in deprivation, can lead you to cut yourself off from the depth of love
within you. Patrick lets himself live in that feeling, lets the pain of it live in him, and when he’s done
singing, when he’s done releasing it into the audience, he knows there are tears glistening on his
cheeks.

* 

After the final bows, when the curtain goes down, Stevie jumps up on him, arms around his neck,
laughing, and Patrick picks her up and swings her around, laughing back. They’re both sweaty and
their makeup’s smudged and it feels glorious, glorious, to be with her in this.

“You were amazing!” she screams, into his shoulder.

“Me?” Patrick says, incredulously, “What about you? You brought the whole house down! Twice!”
He thinks that her devastating, angry version of “Life is a Cabaret” got even more applause than her
beautiful “Maybe This Time.” Patrick shakes his head, unbelieving. “David was *yelling* in the
audience.”

“He was, wasn’t he?” Stevie grins as Patrick sets her down, then shrugs with one shoulder. “Felt
kinda good.”

“Yeah,” Patrick says, high on it, laughing. “Kinda good.”

“Did you know the theatre could be about having emotions and not being humiliated by them?” she
asks. “Because no one actually told me. I thought I’d just be . . . embarrassed.”

Patrick shakes his head again. He takes a deep breath, letting it move in his chest. He feels lighter, in
his lungs, and like the tension in his shoulders is gone, even though simultaneously he’s exhausted
and needs to ice roughly half of himself.

“I’ve never felt that not embarrassed in my entire life,” he says, honestly, on an exhalation of breath.
He doesn’t even understand it. It’s like some kind of magic.

“Right?” Stevie yells, demands. “Right!!”

They get wrapped up with the rest of the cast, then, and with Mrs Rose and Jocelyn and all the crew,
but they keep sneaking glances at each other, while they all celebrate and gush and while the wine
starts pouring. Every time they meet each others’ eyes, they say the same thing, silently: *Can you believe this happened to us?*

*

Eventually, David drives them back to the motel in Patrick’s car, and Patrick kind of collapses into the passenger seat, energy draining out of him. He takes out his phone and turns it back on. There are a bunch of messages from various people around town about the show or the engagement or both, a flood of celebration. He smiles.

**Joon-ho:** OMG HEARD THE NEWS FROM RAY CONGRATULATIONS

This is followed by so many rainbows, hearts, flowers, confetti balls, diamond rings, and champagne glasses that they fill Patrick’s screen almost entirely.

**Patrick:** Thank you!

**Patrick:** Why is there a poomoji in there

**Joon-ho:** oh shit that wasn’t on purpose

**Patrick:** Thanks for cursing my engagement

**Joon-ho:** I couldn’t curse it

**Joon-ho:** your uhaul energy is too strong

Patrick laughs out loud. David glances over at him.

“Getting nice messages?” he asks.

“Joon-ho,” Patrick says, by way of explanation.

David smiles at him. “Yeah, he sent me a congratulatory emoji storm, too.”

He reaches out his hand. Patrick takes it.

*

He and David call Patrick’s parents together, on speakerphone, the next day. Patrick’s still riding high from the performance the night before, twirling around his apartment and singing, until David finally catches his hand, laughing, and makes him sit on the bed with him while they dial.

“You were the one who said you wanted to tell them right away,” David points out. Patrick nods.

“Let’s do it,” he agrees. This version of Patrick, he thinks, can do anything.

They hold hands the whole time. Patrick’s a little embarrassed, because it’s only a matter of weeks since his parents even found out David was his boyfriend, and he’s worried they’ll think he’s moving too fast. But all they hear over the phone is happy exclamations and the tinny sound of his mom clapping.

“We’re very happy to welcome you to the family, David,” Patrick’s dad says, and Patrick squeezes David’s hand even harder.

“Thank you, Mr and Mrs Brewer,” David says, in the soft, shy way he has around them.
“We’d better change that to Clint and Marcy, I think,” Patrick’s dad says. “Not that we don’t appreciate how nice and polite you are.”

David sticks his tongue out at Patrick, and Patrick rolls his eyes.

The congratulations go on, along with questions about whether they have a timeline or any ideas about venues or ceremonies.

“Oh, you know, you could always come back and get married here, Patrick,” his mom suggests, gently. “Pastor Sheila could marry you.”

Patrick licks his lips, because he’s thought about it, but he also has a lot of reservations about it, and it’s a longer conversation than he wants to get into now.

“I—David and I have to talk about that,” Patrick says, hesitating. Almost unconsciously, he moves closer to David on the bed, resting his head against David’s shoulder. David’s arm comes up to wrap around him and rub at his bicep.

“Oh,” his mom says.

“We’re also discussing finding a nice Rabbi around here,” David puts in, and Patrick looks up at him, surprised. David shrugs one shoulder at him.

“That sounds nice,” Patrick’s dad puts in, diplomatically. “Well, we’ll be thrilled to attend, wherever it is.”

“Thanks,” Patrick says, softly, making eye contact with David.

After they get off the call, Patrick leans up to kiss David’s jaw. “You know you don’t have to, like. Be a Jewish shield between me and my family’s church.”

“I know,” David says, lightly, easily. “I didn’t mind.”

“The United Church is very accepting of queer people. They had their first out gay pastor in the early nineties.”

“How progressive of them.”

“Yeah.” Patrick frowns. He doesn’t really want to be Pastor Sheila’s first gay wedding. It would be . . . a thing, back home. And while he sang in the church choir and worked in the youth ministry, he knows now that it’s another space where he never felt quite comfortable. That maybe those careful homilies about *tolerance* from Pastor Sheila were another reason it took him so long, to know about himself. He never wanted to be a spectacle, or an object of charitable pity. He never wanted to be the tolerated one, on the outside, separate from everyone else.

“We can do it, if you want,” he says, coming to the decision. “Find a Rabbi. Have a Jewish ceremony.”

“Hmm.” David’s arms tighten around him. “Gay Jewish weddings are actually the best kind, so that’s tempting. Love a chuppah.”

“I mean, if you have feelings about it beyond the aesthetics, we could talk about that.”

“I don’t know,” David says, honestly. “It wasn’t relevant. Before you, I . . . never thought I’d get married. Thought I’d go straight from bar mitzvah to shiva.”
Patrick kisses his temple. “Before you, I never thought I had choices about it.”

“Then we’ve got a lot to work on, I guess,” David says, softly.

* 

After the show closes, he and David show up to drive Alexis down to the airport. To Patrick’s surprise, Alexis actually protests the idea, saying that it’s too far and she can take the bus.

“Believe me, I’ve ridden in far worse,” she says, sitting on her bed, petting her hair, glancing at the door to Mr and Mrs Rose’s room. Mrs Rose has been leaving the room, to oversee subsequent Cabaret performances and to go to the café, but she’s been dressing in all black and in veils and not talking much, and things are clearly not all right yet. “At least the bus has a driver with a license. And like, doors. I think I can handle it, David.”

David shakes his head. Since the news about the Crows movie, he and Alexis have been having these little battles, mostly fought with significant glances and over meaningless issues. Around their mother, Alexis has been brightly, forcefully cheerful and David has been soft and somber, each of them swayed by her mood whenever they’re within their orbit, in different directions but to similar degrees. Patrick has no idea what it’s going to be like when Alexis is gone. He hopes David will let his dad look after his mom, at least some of the time, so he doesn’t get too sucked into it. Patrick is already putting plans in place to get him out of town, now and then, for a break. Driving Alexis to the airport is a good start.

“I am going to make sure that at least one leg of your travel goes smoothly,” David says. “We’ll see if we can keep you from being kidnapped between here and Thunder Bay.”

The tension leaves Alexis’s face for a moment, and she smiles a real smile, her hands coming up to wave at him in that loose, free way that she has. “Pshaw, David. No one would even want to kidnap me anymore.”

“Still,” David says, looking vexed.

“We’ll drive you, Alexis, it’s really no trouble,” Patrick puts in.

She sighs. “Well. Since you’re so insistent about it. Guess I can’t say no to my future brother-in-law.” Standing, Alexis boops Patrick on the nose. Patrick smiles, pleased, and glances at David, who’s covering his own broad smile with his hand.

“See? That’s why I can’t let my future sister-in-law take the bus,” Patrick replies.

“Ugh, God, you two are so gross,” David says, but he’s still smiling.

“But Patrick,” Alexis says, suddenly serious. “You and David have to text me about all the wedding details. Like, everything. All the planning. I mean, obviously I’ll be super busy? Because there’s like. Snorkeling? Or whatever? And I’ll definitely have plenty to do. But I’m sure I can find time to help out.”

“Okay,” Patrick says, softly. “We’ll do that.”

“Amazing, so cool,” Alexis beams.

He and David watch her as she gathers her suitcases and her big floppy white hat.

“I put some books in your bags,” David says. “In case you wanted to like. Read something. Or in
Alexis looks up at him, frowning. “Wow, thanks so much, David, I love carrying heavy dead trees with me to remote destinations.”

“Mmm, I’m just saying? Your phone might not work reliably and you might be glad to have something on paper.” He huffs out a breath. “Don’t worry, I picked out some you’ll like.”

Alexis sighs and pets her hair back. “Fine,” she says. “I guess it’s too late to take them out now.”

Patrick steps towards the bags. “Well. Why don’t I take those out to the car while you say goodbye to your mom and dad,” he says.

“I’ll help you,” David says, grabbing a suitcase himself.

When they get outside, Patrick looks at him, reading his expression: worry, and relief, and then about four other kinds of worry.

“Alexis will be okay,” he says, figuring that has to be at least one of the worries.

“I know,” David sighs. “Alexis is always okay.”

“If her phone doesn’t work, we’ll figure it out. We’ll send her letters. Carrier pigeons.” They set the suitcases down next to the car, and David leans into Patrick suddenly and hugs him.

“Thank you,” he says.

“What else is bothering you?” Patrick asks, from inside the hug.

David shakes his head against Patrick’s shoulder. “You know.”

Patrick pulls back, moving them into a loose embrace. “Hmm, I’d guess . . . looking after your mom when Alexis isn’t around. Looking after your dad who’s trying to look after your mom. Ted and Alexis breaking up while they’re in the Galapagos. Alexis getting eaten by a giant turtle.”

“Ted getting eaten by a giant turtle and leaving Alexis alone to grieve on the beach,” David puts in.

“That’s a big one, I agree,” Patrick says, seriously. “Well, you know, one of the good things about having a fiancé is that you can ask him to help you with all of those things. And also he will text your sister one million terrible wedding cakes to distract her from anything that’s going on.”

“You would do that?” David asks.

“I already have some great ones saved on my phone. Just all queued up.”

“I do like having a fiancé,” David says, smiling.

“I like having a fiancé too,” Patrick agrees, smiling back.

“Oh my God, you two, you’re like engaged, you don’t have to make out like horny teenagers whenever you’re alone for two minutes,” Alexis says, coming out of her parents’ motel room.

“But also, we’re engaged, so we can if we want to,” Patrick points out, making David break into a pleased little laugh.

When they drop Alexis at the airport, she stops Patrick with a hand on his arm while David is
grunting at the suitcases.

“You’ll look after them, right? Like. All of them.”

Patrick feels a wave of deep fondness for her. “Yeah, I will. I promise. You don’t have to worry.”

“David’s the worrier,” Alexis says, biting her lip. “I’m the easygoing one.”


“Our family,” Alexis says, a smile breaking across her face.

“Our family.” Patrick grins back at her, then clears his throat. “Speaking of. Stevie will help, too.”

“Good,” she sighs, nodding her head. “And seriously? Tell David he doesn’t need to worry about me.”

“He will anyway,” Patrick says, thinking about David secretly sneaking books he thought Alexis might like into her suitcase after she fell asleep. “But I’ll tell him.”

“Um, thanks for not helping at all,” David calls, from the mess of suitcases, and Patrick and Alexis give each other one last eyeroll before going to help.

*

David turns out to be very cautiously on board with the queer fashion show idea, so while Patrick intended to work with Gabe on the event, all three of them end up doing it together. It’s fun, not least because he gets to watch David subtly and not-so-subtly give Gabe increasingly difficult tests of aesthetic taste. Gabe’s instincts are better than Patrick’s, but far below David’s obviously cherished hopes and dreams for him, so it’s inevitably hilarious. Eventually, Patrick has to interrupt and make them get back on track, working through the checklist of responsibilities so they can actually get something done.

“Oh, announcer,” Gabe says, looking at his copy of the checklist. “So, are you gonna announce the show, Mr Brewer?” Patrick shrugs.

“I thought I would.”

David gives him a look over his own checklist. “Please,” he says.

“Something bothering you, David?” Patrick asks, innocently.

“I’m obviously the best qualified to announce a fashion show,” David says. “Who else?”

“I’m sure you’d be amazing, Mr Rose,” Gabe says, because he’s turned into kind of a little suck-up where David’s concerned. “But I was thinking, if you do want a younger vibe—” he winces at David’s dark and angry glare, “—we could ask this guy I know in Thornbridge, he’s studying fashion and he was in my sister’s class at SCHS.”

David takes something of a face journey of his own, but Patrick is very proud to see that he lands on acceptance at the end of it. “Fine,” he says. “Who is this person?”

“He knows you, actually,” Gabe says. “Connor Peterson?”

Try as he might, Patrick can’t get the story of how David knows a gay fashion major who used to go to high school here out of either of them, and has to wait until the actual night of the fashion show.
“Oh, David tried to it-gets-better me when I was in grade ten,” Connor says, sipping a glass of wine and looking way too young to actually pull off the sophisticated air he’s obviously trying for. “And ended up complaining to me about some girl he was friends-with-benefits-ing.”

“You tried to it-gets-better someone?” Patrick asks, fighting the laughter that’s trying to break out of him. He can’t imagine the scene.

“I don’t want to talk about it. Jocelyn made me.” He turns to Connor. “I see you didn’t end up going far, when you got out of this town.”

“Farther than you,” Connor says, looking David up and down disdainfully. Patrick whistles.

“That kid has your number,” he mutters, to David, a few minutes later.

“I know. He did when he was sixteen, too. It’s horrifying.”

“I can’t believe you agreed to bring him back here,” Patrick says. “Normally you’d never admit a rival.”

David sighs. “The thing is, I think he’s going to be an excellent announcer.”

In the end, he’s right; Connor actually is an excellent announcer, just the right balance of encouraging and what David calls shady. Everyone has a fun time, and they sell a bunch of the more adventurous locally made clothes and accessories that they got in for the purpose.

“If we keep doing this, no one at your school’s gonna dress boring anymore,” Patrick points out, while they’re watching the last set of people walk the catwalk.

Gabe chuckles. “I might get one of those leather bracelets for myself,” he says.

Patrick nods. “Pick one out. It’s on me.”

Gabe looks up at him, surprised. Patrick smiles. “You did a really good job. This is gonna make a difference, giving queer kids fun stuff like this to do.”

“I . . . have other ideas,” Gabe says, hesitantly.

“I thought you might. Write them down. Bring me proposals when they’re ready.”


He and David close up afterwards. “So, I have to ask,” Patrick says, locking the door and pulling on it once to ensure the bolt is in place. “What advice did you give Connor when you mentored him?”

Together, they turn away, towards Patrick’s car, which is parked around the side.

“I did not mentor him? I met him once. I think I asked him if, like, he was stable? And I asked if he needed help fitting in.”

Patrick imagines it, David Rose asking a kid if he wants help fitting in. “What were you wearing, on the day you were giving advice to rural gay teenagers to help them fit in more?” He takes David’s hand in his, interlacing their fingers.

“Balenciaga, maybe? Or, no, I think it was the Givenchy with the—oh, I see. I see what you’re doing.”
Patrick snickers. “I’m just savouring the image. You know, he did end up going into fashion. Maybe he liked your Balenciaga.”

“I think it was Givenchy,” David grumbles, but he looks pleased, underneath it. They get to the car, and it’s not until they’re inside, strapped in, and Patrick’s pulling out that he speaks again. “I’m not cut out to mentor the queer youth.”

“Well, you don’t have to,” Patrick says.

David sighs. “But I suppose Connor can come back for another queer fashion show. Maybe in six months.”

“We did sell a lot of accessories,” Patrick points out. “And I bet it’s good for his CV.”

“Mmm.”

* 

Patrick’s parents call the store a lot less, these days, in part because Patrick tends to text them back, and in part because David gave them his number while they were here and now they just . . . call him to talk to him. And since they found out about the engagement, they do it a lot.

“I can talk to them about it,” Patrick says, hesitantly. It’s a quiet Sunday evening, and David’s just gotten off the phone after a good half hour with his mom. “If it’s—too much.”

“It’s, I mean, it’s new,” David says, chewing his lip. “I haven’t ever—the last time the parents of someone I was with called me on the phone, I was in high school, and being lectured not to corrupt their son.”

“That . . . sounds like a rough story,” Patrick says, looking up from the cookie mix he’s stirring.

“Rougher after I told them some of the ways their son corrupted me, in graphic detail,” David says. He waves a hand, to signal that he’s not feeling any deep feelings about it, or at least doesn’t want to talk about them if he is. “In retrospect, kind of a dick move, Justin didn’t deserve that.”

“I can see the temptation, though,” Patrick says. It’s a little bit true, he can; he just can’t imagine ever actually doing it, responding to that kind of threat with defiant, graphic, inappropriate truths. “And you were obviously a brat.”

“I can be bratty for you later if you like,” David purrs, giving him what he obviously thinks of as a sultry look from over on the couch. The annoying thing is, it is actually pretty sultry.

“Yeah?” Patrick asks, smiling helplessly. “You want me to make you behave?”

“Mm-hmm,” David grins.

Patrick lets himself think about it for a minute, then shakes his head. “Okay, but, later. We were talking about your phone conversations with my parents,” he points out, trying to course-correct. The cookie mix is done, so he pulls out a pan and starts forming them into little balls.

“Mood-killer. No, it’s good. What I meant to say is, it’s new, for me, but I don’t mind it. I kind of like it. But you should tell me if I’m messing it up, because literally it is all unexplored territory for me.”

Patrick shakes his head, but at the same time, can’t stop himself from smiling. “Oh, come on, David.
Don’t give me that I’m-so-unsure-oh-gosh-it’s-my-first-time act. You’re just fishing. You know they adore you.”

They do, is the thing. Whatever David said to them, when he took over that gift basket on Patrick’s birthday, cemented him, in his parents’ minds, as someone who would fight for Patrick, for Patrick’s happiness. He’s sometimes tempted to ask David what they talked about, that day, but he holds himself back; he gets the feeling that David feels private about it.

David’s answering grin is the smuggest thing Patrick’s ever seen. “They do, don’t they. I’m really getting an A at this whole son-in-law thing already.”

“May I remind you that I am your mother’s star actor and that she has been actively wooing me to play the lead in *Guys and Dolls* next year.”

“It’s not a competition, sweetie.”

“Then why does it come with letter grades?” Patrick asks, reasonably, putting the cookies in the oven and setting the timer.

“Did you want an A? I can give you an A.” David stands up from the couch and comes over to the counter, because Patrick’s finished the labour part of making the cookies and he can’t be asked to help anymore.

“Oh, I want an A, Professor Rose,” Patrick grins, wide-eyed, “I’m willing to work for it.” When David grabs him by his lapels and reels him in for a kiss, Patrick moves with it.

“Mmm. We can investigate *that* little kink further sometime soon,” he says. “But yes, Mr Brewer, you are getting an A in son-in-law so far. My dad called your business sense *acute*, ugh. And don’t think I don’t notice that all the *Guys and Dolls* talk is distracting my mother from her crushing depression.”

“I do what I can,” Patrick says. He wipes down the counters and puts away the eggs.

“So how long till those cookies are done?”

“Ten minutes.” David’s nodding too fast and looking away, so Patrick asks. “Did you have something you wanted to do? Because I think the kinky teacher-student thing is gonna take longer than that.”

“It’s, um.” He sighs, then looks up at Patrick. “Your parents have mentioned, a couple times, about us . . . going out there. To see them. And, and meet the rest of your family.”

Patrick frowns. “It’s pretty far. And it’s hard to leave the store.”

David shrugs. “Gabe’s working out pretty well. With some supervision from Stevie, he could cover over a weekend. Or we could shut down for a few days, we can afford it now.” He runs his hands over Patrick’s shoulders. “If you’re not ready for that yet, we don’t have to, but if what you have are practical objections, we can probably make it work.”

“Huh,” Patrick says. He thinks about it, really thinks about it; getting to introduce David to Hallie and Neil and Tyler and Victoria, to their kids, to his great aunts, to his childhood home, to the places where he grew up. It’s a little nerve-wracking, but it’s exciting, too, the idea of inviting David into all of that, into all that he used to be. “I only have practical objections,” he says, at last.

“Okay,” David says. “So, we’ll go, right? I’ll go with you, and hopefully your parents will prep
everyone else so they’ll all like me, and I’ll memorize the cousins’ names in advance—”

“I’ll help,” Patrick says, cutting off the flow of words with a kiss. “I’ll tutor you. You’ll get an A in that too.”

“Shockingly, fucking my tutors has rarely resulted in an A, in the past,” David says.

“We’re gonna change that,” Patrick grins.

When the cookies are cool enough, Patrick feeds them to David, using his thumb on David’s chin to open his mouth, pushing his fingers in against David’s tongue, leaving messy little smears of chocolate on his lips. He watches with fascination the way he closes his eyes in pleasure as he lets Patrick inside. Later, when Patrick kisses him, he licks the thick, warm, sugar-sweetness from his mouth, and when he puts his fist inside him, that’s sweet too, aching and rich and slow.

*  

Patrick waits for it, and eventually David comes to him with a half-full sketchbook, visions for their wedding, and Patrick responds by pulling out the budget he’s drawn up and the categorized list of things he wants, and hopes for, and worries about.

David’s smile is small and fond. “I didn’t know you’d been doing any planning.”

“I took a few first steps, but I wanted to do this together,” Patrick says. “We build the best things when we work together.”

“I thought so too.” They smile at each other, and it’s sappy, it’s so sappy, and Patrick can’t even bring himself to care. There’s nothing he wants to do more than talk to David about their wedding, to start working towards it. He was worried that he wouldn’t feel this way, that the excitement of the planning would be clouded over by his previous bad experience; his excitement is, in itself, a relief.

Opening his book, David describes moods, and themes, and colour schemes, takes him through the large-scale interlocking parts that would come together for each one. A spring wedding for hope, flowers just out of the bud, bridal party in soft greys and purples; an autumn wedding for plenty, local fruits and vegetables and charcuterie, dancing in the many-coloured twilight; a wedding near the water, for change; a wedding in a church or a synagogue, for forging new traditions out of old.

That’s how David puts it, a church or a synagogue, and it was on Patrick’s list to follow up on that question, since their previous discussion, so he takes his opportunity.

“Have you thought about whether you have a preference between those, if we do one or the other?”

David shrugs. “Your mom talks about church a lot. I know you have feelings about the one you went to growing up, but we could have it at one around here, if we find one you like. I thought it might be important to you.”

“I think the church is mostly important to my mom,” Patrick clarifies. “I meant what I said before: I’m fine to have a Jewish ceremony. But what about you? Have you thought about it?”

“I think the synagogue might be important to my dad,” David replies. “But I’m fine to not have a Jewish ceremony.”

“Hmm. So, options include two officiants—”

“Ugh, that makes a wedding so busy.”
Patrick huffs out a laugh. “Or we just go with a Jewish ceremony by default, in part to piss off my Uncle Doug—”

“Your Uncle Doug who isn’t talking to you now?”

“Mm-hm. Who we’re not inviting. Or non-religious, we get married by a friend or a family member or have a civil ceremony.”

David snorts. “Can you imagine Stevie doing it?”

“Stevie’s your best man,” Patrick objects. David looks up at him sharply.

“I didn’t tell you that. I didn’t even ask her, yet.”

Patrick would say who else are you going to ask?, but he’s a better fiancé than that, and anyway, David already knows it.

“Yeah,” Patrick says, instead. “But think of her in a soft grey tux with her hair up and a budding flower in her lapel.” He’s gay and all, but he has to admit it’s a beautiful image. Or maybe he thinks that because the image is kind of gay.

David’s face softens, predictably.

“And don’t forget that you’re marrying me, not her.”

“It’s hard to forget, honey.” David kisses him, soft and slow, meaning it. “For one thing, Stevie would never have made this . . . very comprehensive budget.”

“So? Officiants? Religions? If it’s just to please our parents, it might be just as easy to let the whole thing go.”

“Let’s come back to that one,” David says, pursing his lips. “I think I still need to think about it. Maybe . . . maybe talk to my dad about it.”

“We can come back to it,” Patrick agrees. Then, because the look on David’s face is a little pinched and nervous, he adds, “Give you more time to . . . oscillate.”

David’s expression breaks into a surprised laugh. “You should know by now that rushing my process gets you substandard results.”

“Is that what I learned?” Patrick asks. “Or was it that I should just get you high and let you leave a bunch of voicemails on my phone?”

“Hey, it worked last time,” David says, pressing his face into Patrick’s shoulder. Patrick wraps an arm around him and kisses him on the top of his head.

“It did,” Patrick agrees. “It worked.”

* 

For his LGBTQ2AIP-plus night, Patrick wheedles Ray so that Ray will wheedle the building owner, and gets them rooftop access. It takes him a day or so to clean it up, but after a little elbow grease he thinks it’ll do nicely. David helps him hang some lanterns and strings of lights, and they spread white tablecloths over the folding tables he borrowed from the bingo hall. He picks up a bunch of lawn chairs from Twyla and from Gwen, which are easy enough to haul up to the roof, and with some glass-enclosed candles from the store holding the tablecloths down, there’s a real sense of ambiance.
The roof is one big open space, so he thinks the vibe will be like that, too, everyone gathered in one big group. He puts out some board games, some coolers full of beer, and some snacks.

“Thanks for helping,” he says, kissing David on the cheek. “I know it’s not your thing.”

David shrugs. “Well, I saw the lanterns you were going to get, and I felt this crushing wave of despair, so. It’s really in my own self-interest to help out.”

“I see, I see. Then I guess I don’t have to thank you, or be extra nice to you, or owe you a favour.”

“Are there favours now? Because reaching up that high might’ve done something to my back, I might actually need two.”

“Definitely zero favours,” Patrick says. “Seriously, though. You don’t have to come. You can hang out downstairs, or I can give you a lift home.”

“I’ll stay, at least for a while. See what it’s like. It can’t be more boring than sitting on the bench outside of Bob’s Garage and waiting for nothing to go by.”

“That’s the spirit.” Patrick finishes lighting the candles. “And hey, by the way. I talked to Ronnie about changing the name.”

“What?” David’s distracted, unfolding lawn chairs and trying to figure out some way to place them around the space so that they’ll magically become aesthetically pleasing.

“For LGBTQ2AI-plus night. We’re changing it to LGBTQ2AIP-plus night. Putting a P in there.”

David turns to him, wide-eyed. “I was joking about that!”

Patrick shrugs. “I wasn’t.”

“I really didn’t need you to do that. I’m fine under like, the Q, or there’s that very accommodating ‘plus,’ or I can even do the B in a pinch—”

Patrick walks up to him, touches his shoulders. “You don’t have to do the B in a pinch,” he says, softly.

David’s eyes go up and to the left, like he’s trying to think through something. “That . . . sounds really sexual,” he says, at last.

“I know,” Patrick says, also bothered by it. “I can’t think of a joke either.” He shakes his head. “But you know what I mean. You belong here. Even if you don’t want to come, that’s fine, it’s still for you too.”

“All right,” David says, huskily. “If it’s for me, then I can eat these chips.” His hand steals towards the bowl on the table next to them.

Patrick slaps his hand. “Not till the guests arrive.”

“What’re you gonna do? Punish me?” Eyes dark, he reaches for the bowl again, and Patrick tries to slap him again, but David catches his hand first and so Patrick has to lean in to kiss him, instead.

“Maybe later,” Patrick breathes, against his lips.

Which is when the first guest shows up, of course, having followed Patrick’s signs up the stairs.
“Guess this must be the place,” Jeff jokes, as Patrick and David pull reluctantly apart.

Patrick grins and walks over to hug him, and then Jeff and David wave at each other in a friendly way.

“I see you’ve got the board games out. David, you’re not worried that me and Ray will embarrass you at Small World again?”

“That was a one-time thing,” David says, dangerously. “I was distracted by having to play as the trolls.”

“We’ll see,” Jeff grins.

Maggie and Katherine come up the stairs slowly behind him, and Patrick goes to greet them, too, and then before he even has time to notice the space is full of people, chatting happily and enjoying a cold beer on a warm roof in the twilight of early autumn.

“Ronnie,” Patrick says, when she and Karen come up the stairs, hand in hand.

“Patrick,” Ronnie says, nodding.

“Hi, Patrick, how are you? So nice of you to have us,” Karen laughs. She kisses Ronnie absently on the cheek and then goes off to say hi to other people.

“I was thinking about the scheduling for baseball season next year,” Ronnie says. “Talking to Yvonne and Grant, in Elmdale, who do a lot of the logistical work to make everything run smoothly.”

“Yeah? And?” Patrick takes a sip of his beer.

“And, I was thinking: we should schedule more home games. Not just the one from regular season play, but some exhibition games, too. Beginning and end of the season. Your team versus mine.”

“I like it,” Patrick says. “I’ll ask the team, but I think it’s a great idea. Create more rivalry. Get more people out to the games.”

“My thinking exactly.”

“Send me the details, then,” Patrick says. “Can I get you a beer?”

Ronnie nods. “You can.”

Once people have had a chance to chat and relax and play a few games, Patrick stands up on an old wooden bench and asks for everyone’s attention.

“Hey, everybody, thanks for coming,” he says. “I’m Patrick, I’m hosting tonight, and I hope you’re all enjoying yourselves.”

There’s a mild cheer at that, mostly Alice and Joon-ho, but Patrick appreciates it.

“Couple of things: we added a letter to the acronym, since it didn’t have a P for pansexual before tonight, so it’s now officially the LGBTQ2AIP-plus shindig.”

“Just gonna call it the shindig,” someone shouts out, and Patrick waves his hand at them.

“Do what you like,” he says. “Second thing, I’ve been told that the Bob’s Garage hat is running a
little low on suggestions these days, so if you want to use the pencils and paper at the tables to write some new ones, just put them in the hat when you’re done. It’s over here by the beer coolers.”

Folks nod, and a few pick up pencils thoughtfully.

“Third and last thing, a little birdie told me recently that this month actually marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the first LGBTQ2AIP-plus shindig.”

Ronnie, standing near the front, snorts. “You mean Ray told you.”

“All right, the little birdie was Ray.”

“Isn’t it always,” Joon-ho yells, from over by the dip, mouth half-full. A laugh ripples through the crowd, and Ray holds up his hands in acceptance of this judgement.

“Of course,” he continues, “back then it wasn’t the LGBTQ2AIP-plus shindig, it was just an L.”

“It was Ronnie’s way of trying to hook up with other lesbians out here in the middle of nowhere,” Karen puts in.

“But it’s grown to something far more than just Ronnie’s early attempt to invent lesbian Grindr,” Patrick says, to another laugh. He looks out over all the faces in the crowd, everyone he knows, everyone he’s gotten to know over the last year and a half. This is where he first felt accepted, among these people. The first men he was consciously attracted to, the first queer friends he ever made, the people who’d gotten him to this point, engaged to a man he loves and happy in his own skin for the first time in his life. They’re here.

When the titters from the crowd die down, Patrick says: “It’s grown to be something that helps people, that builds our community, that creates real connections and friendships and love. And in recognition of that, Ray and I got everyone to pitch in to buy a little something.”

Ray walks up with the gift bag, and hands it to Ronnie, whose eyebrows shoot up. “Ronnie,” he says, “thank you for creating this Schitt’s Creek institution. We’re all better for having it.”

“Knowing you, Patrick, I’m worried there’s a rubber snake in this bag,” Ronnie says, loud enough to carry, and everyone laughs again. Patrick shrugs, jumping down from the bench. She reaches inside, pulling out the bottle of whiskey first and holding it up for the crowd to cheer at.

“We figured we couldn’t go wrong with that,” Ray grins.

“There’s more,” Patrick says.

“Haven’t hit the snake yet,” Ronnie grimaces, digging deeper into the bag. She pulls out the slip of paper and cranes her head backwards. “Hang on, haven’t got my glasses. It says, gift certificate for the Crystal Elms Spa.” She looks around at the people assembled. “Well, I’m not gonna say no to this! Thanks, everyone.”

“Happy anniversary,” Patrick says, quietly, smiling. “To us all.”

Off to his left, David holds up his glass of wine, his long arm and the sudden motion making it visible above the crowd. “Happy anniversary,” he says, loud enough to carry.

Patrick turns; he didn’t even know David was standing there.

“Happy anniversary,” the crowd answers, holding up beer bottles and water bottles and cans of pop.
Patrick clinks with a lot of people, and last of all with David. They sip their drinks, and then Patrick kisses him.

“Thanks, baby,” he murmurs.

“There is a correct way and an incorrect way to conclude a speech,” David says, suppressing a smile. “I just couldn’t bear to see you do it incorrectly.”

“I’m so lucky to have you around,” Patrick says, drawling it out like he’s being sarcastic, but meaning it, really meaning it.

“I know,” David says, fondly. Patrick ducks his head.

“Let’s mingle.”

David sighs. “If we must.”

For all his protests, though, David seems to have fun, playing board games with various people, even ones he doesn’t know, and talking animatedly with Denise about an Eden Robinson novel they’ve both read, and accepting a couple of hits off of Maggie’s joint, off in the corner.

Patrick leaves him to it, not wanting to make a big deal out of it, and hangs out with people on the other side of the party, giving him some space.

Ken comes in, a little late, and Patrick looks around; he thinks that Ben got here early, but might’ve left early, too.

“Hey,” he says, by way of greeting. “What’s up?”

“Not a lot.” Ken says. He sits down next to Patrick at one of the tables, where Patrick finally beat Jeff, Derrick, and Alice at Settlers of Catan. The pieces are still scattered, telling of his victory.

“You and Ben break up?” Patrick asks, because he knows he saw them together, at Ronnie’s place, last month. By the end of the night they were making out on the back porch.

“You get right to the point, don’t you,” Ken laughs. “Yeah. I thought it was—well. I guess he thought it was more casual than I did.”

“That’s too bad,” Patrick says. “Sorry to hear it.”

Ken sighs. “But, anyway, I showered and managed to drive all the way here, even if I’m late, so that’s something, right?”

“Yup,” Patrick agrees. “Good start. You wanna beer?”

“That would be fabulous.”

Patrick stands to get it for him. “I couldn’t help but notice you never came back into the store, to talk to David,” he says. He pops the bottlecap and hands it over.

Ken drinks, then purses his lips. “Yeah. Sorry about that. I kept meaning to, though. Kept not getting around to it.”

Frowning, Patrick sits down next to him again. “Having some trouble?” he asks.

Ken glances at him, surprised, maybe because they don’t know each other that well and even then,
the circumstances were awkward, but Patrick tries to smile sympathetically.

“Yeah,” he breathes. “Not doing so good, lately. Haven’t really . . . been out of the house, much.”

Patrick remembers that feeling, suddenly, viscerally, the inability to get off the couch, to go see friends, to do more than the bare minimum to survive. He’d felt it, back home, when he was spiraling downwards towards a wedding he didn’t want.

“Making any art?” he asks.

Ken laughs. “God, no.”

“Well. I feel a little responsible, since it was my idea to introduce you to Ben.”

“It’s not just him,” Ken sighs.

“Gotcha,” Patrick says, softly. He has no idea how to handle this, what he’s supposed to do. He tries to think about what he would’ve wanted to hear, back then. “You’re not alone,” he says, eventually, hoping it’s one of those clichés that still works. “I’ve been there.”

Ken gives him a wan smile. “Thanks.”

Biting his lip, Patrick thinks again. It was Ray’s boundless energy, Ronnie’s challenges, the compassion of everyone he met here that got him out of his own funk, the last time, and gave him space to figure himself out. “Do you have anyone who can help?” he asks.

This makes Ken’s smile turn real. “Yeah. I’m gonna— I think it’s gonna be okay. My big brother came up to visit me. To help.”

“Okay.” Patrick nods, lets out a breath. “So, hey, you wanna come meet David properly? Show him your art?”

Ken lets out a self-conscious little laugh. “Sure.”

They find David deep in conversation with Steven about running small independent stores in rural communities. Steven’s in dark maroon lipstick and matching dramatic eye makeup, tonight; it makes Patrick glad to see.

“It’s hard to maintain standards of taste,” Steven is saying, to an enthusiastic nod from David.

“Hey, David, I think you remember Ken?” Patrick says, interrupting. David looks up and raises an eyebrow.

“In fact, I do,” he says.

“Ken, this is my fiancé, David.”


They shake, and Patrick explains what he’s thinking, about carrying some of Ken’s paintings in the store. Before too long, Steven’s in on it, too, saying that he has a blank wall in his clothing store and could use something classy to fill it with. David and Ken get into some kind of conversation about early twenty-first century art trends that Patrick can’t follow, but that they seem to enjoy.

For the moment, at least, Ken looks a little happier, and David looks comfortable, in his element.
Patrick retreats, and walks around until he finds Joon-ho.

“Hey,” Joon-ho says, pulling him into a big, warm hug. “Haven’t seen you all night.”

Patrick squeezes him back. “I’ve been hosting.”


Patrick blushes, pleased, because he does; he always has, and now he gets to do it with this group of people, this family. He looks around at them, all of them, gathered together on this rooftop in the fresh air, and feels a wave of something powerful wash through him, cousin to the way he feels for his baseball team, his parents; cousin to the way he feels for David. He looks for the words to articulate it, and finds them.

“Yeah. Well. That’s my story,” he says. “I came to Schitt’s Creek and I fell in love.”

*

When the time comes to pick something out of the hat, Patrick gets up on the bench again, and the crowd cheers while he rummages around dramatically through the huge stack for the right slip of paper.

The one he pulls out reads *friendship*, in David’s beautiful swoopy scrawl. Patrick finds him in the crowd, with his arms crossed and his lips pursed, holding back a smile; he’ll have to talk to him later about ballot box stuffing.

“All right,” he says. “It seems like tonight, we’re gonna be telling stories about friendship.”

They do.

*

“Steven’s gonna give us a deal if we go to him for our suits for the wedding,” David says, much later, when they’re crawling into bed.

“Oh yeah?” Patrick asks.

“And did you know that Maggie’s a photographer? I want to see her work, but she did say I would be a gorgeous subject, so she must have some kind of eye.”

Patrick laughs. “You are a gorgeous subject,” he says. “How the camera even operates, when your face is before it, how it can even summon the courage to take a single photo, I don’t—” he ducks the pillow that David throws his way, then retrieves it, because it’s David’s pillow and he needs it to sleep.

“Anyway. Lots of good leads for wedding stuff. We can get some items checked off your list.” They settle in under the covers, and Patrick turns off the light.

“And make some decisions to narrow down your mood board,” Patrick agrees.

“Patrick?”

“Yes?”

“I had a nice time.”
Patrick grins and gathers him up in his arms, presses a kiss into his hair. “I’m glad,” he says.

“I’m not saying I’m gonna go to these things all the time. I’m exhausted. I talked to so many people. Some of them were like. Wearing hats.”

“Oh, well, we can’t have that.” Patrick himself is still kind of buzzing, wired and energetic, from the conversations and the company and just the pleasure of having so many people in his space with him. “I’ll talk to Ronnie about a no-hats rule.”

“But it was nice. They were nice. It was new.”

“You can do it whenever you like. Or not.”

“Well. Now that there’s a P in there, I’ll have to put in an appearance sometimes.”

“I can find another pansexual around here somewhere,” Patrick says, waving a hand. “You’re not that special.”

“No? Why are you marrying me, then?” Spoken in a mumbled huff of air against Patrick’s neck. David’s breathing is slowing into a familiar rhythm; he always falls asleep fast, consciousness to dreaming in no more than a minute. Patrick’s not like that at all, tends to be kept up by his thoughts, but when he sleeps with David he finds himself falling asleep easier, lulled by the sight of his soft mouth and his closed eyes, by the long, slow motion of his breath, in and out.

Patrick’s mind fills with answers to this question: because there’s a tax break, because they work well together, because they have fun together, because they’re deeply and astonishingly in love, because the sex is amazing, because David will take on the whole world for the sake of the people he loves and because Patrick would do pretty much anything for him. Because they’re going to keep on growing together. It’s a simple list, but a good one, he thinks. It all adds up. But there’s more to it, too, a reason that doesn’t make logical sense, that doesn’t have any proof but the deep certainty in Patrick’s heart.

“Because this is where I’m meant to be,” Patrick says, eventually, meaning: in this town, in this community, and most especially, in your arms; but David’s already asleep.

*  

Patrick slides their bags into the trunk of his car, slowly, deliberately, taking his time to puzzle it out and get it right.

David has, predictably, brought a lot of suitcases, and Patrick has, anxiously, brought a reasonable number of suitcases (one) but also a lot of presents for his family and old friends, and with all of that together it’s like a game of Tetris trying to make it fit.

“You forgot the wine, honey,” David says, kissing him on the cheek and handing him a heavy box.

“Oh God,” Patrick says. It’s twelve bottles of Stonebrook Farms’ best, for them to give away. He would’ve been kicking himself if he’d left it behind. “Back seat?”

David opens the door for him, and he fits the wine into the footwell. Eventually, they have everything.

“I’ve got snacks and drinks for the road,” David says, and smiles at him sunnily. “Plus a first aid kit.”

“Ha ha,” Patrick grouses.
“You’re sure you want to stay with your parents? There’s still time to get a hotel.”

“I’m sure. Because I am not interested in dealing with my mom’s sad face if we don’t stay with them.”

“Got it. Is it like your sad face? All muppety around the mouth?”

That’s actually a really good description of what his mom looks like when she’s sad. Patrick frowns.

“Yeah, like that.”

“Interesting choice for you to critique the faces I make,” Patrick replies. “You sure that’s a war you want to start?”

“Point taken,” David grumbles.

Just then Mr and Mrs Rose come out of the motel, both of them smiling into the dappled autumn sunshine. “About to embark upon your journey to Ithaka, I see,” Mrs Rose observes. “A long-awaited homecoming.”

“Hm, except that I would be Penelope in this scenario? And I’m already here,” David points out, gesturing at his own body, up and down, with the kind of frantic energy he only gets around his family.

“It’s a metaphor, darling,” Mrs Rose says, waving this objection away. “Patrick heading for home.”

“Well, it’s a one-week visit, so. Not that big a deal.” Patrick looks over his checklist. There are a couple of items at the bottom still unaccounted for. He takes his keys out of his pocket, separating the store key from the rest.

“Oh, right, right,” Mr Rose says, accepting the key from Patrick. “Minding the store while you’re gone! Quite literally!”

“Stevie and Gabe will be minding the store,” David explains to his father, for the tenth time. “This is just in case of any emergencies. There is no need for you to go there unless it is on fire.”

“Which it won’t be,” Patrick says.

“No, of course, why would it be on fire? You don’t have to worry, boys, I am going to make sure that absolutely nothing gets set on fire while you’re gone.”

“Okay this is making me anxious,” David says, turning to Patrick.

“I hear you,” Patrick mutters back. He looks at his checklist again; just one more item. He finds it where he threw it in the back seat and hangs it up instead, from the little hook next to the window.

“You’re bringing your jacket?” David asks, pleased to see the white and navy bomber that he picked out.

“Oh, I’m bringing the whole outfit,” Patrick says, smoothing his hands down the lapels of David’s long-sleeved shirt. Patrick’s never seen him in this shirt before, all buttoned up, with his necklace strung under the collar; it’s a fancier look than his usual. Patrick thinks he wants to make a good impression the moment they arrive. “I’m gonna wear it to the engagement party my family is throwing us.”

“You’re—oh,” David says, softly. “You’re gonna—”
“I want everyone to see me like that,” Patrick says. “To see who I am now. Who I am with you.”


“You’re not repacking, David,” Patrick says, quellingly. “I just got your suitcases into the trunk.”

David grins, sly. “But I thought we were making grand declarations of love,” he says. “Surely you waiting patiently for me to repack is part of that.”


“Gotta marry me first, baby,” David says, sweetly. Patrick kisses him, hard and fast, enough to put a dizzy look on his face.

“Mr and Mrs Rose, thanks for seeing us off,” Patrick says. They’ve been of no practical help at all, but they have been standing here smiling at them, so that’s worth something.

“Oh, I have to think we’re at the point where you should call me Johnny,” Mr Rose says. He looks over to his wife. “And . . .”

“Mrs Rose,” Mrs Rose says. “Until at least the day of your nuptials, I should think.”

“Of course,” Patrick smiles.

“Well. Safe travels!” Mr Rose—Johnny? exclaims. Then he wraps David up in a hug, something Patrick has never seen before. David’s arms sort of spin awkwardly for a moment before coming up to pat his father’s shoulders lightly, and there’s something inherently wrong about the number of backpats Mr Rose is doing in the process. Patrick winces, then has his wince interrupted when Mr Rose hugs him next.

“Oh, I get one,” he says. Johnny—Mr Rose—smells pleasantly like clean linen and expensive aftershave, and his arms are brisk but warm around Patrick’s arm and shoulder. It’s over quickly, and Patrick feels bemused, a little touched.

“Remember you’ve got family back here, too,” Mr Rose says, with a firm, determined nod.

“Oh my God, Dad, it’s fine,” David says, rolling his eyes.

“Thank you, Mr Rose,” Patrick says, seriously, holding back a smile. "Johnny."

Mrs Rose steps up to him, then, and cups his face in her hand. Patrick is shocked into stillness.

“We shall miss you,” she says, and leans in to do a slow, deliberate, double-cheek air kiss with him. Patrick air-kisses back to the best of his ability. “Practice some of the footwork we talked about.”

“The production isn’t till next summer,” Patrick laughs.

“Nevertheless,” Mrs Rose smiles. Then she moves away from him to David, and, very gently, draws him down and kisses his forehead. David bends his head willingly, and closes his eyes, like it’s something they’ve done before, but Patrick’s sure he’s never seen it, anymore than he’s ever seen Johnny hug him. It’s powerful to watch. He has a suspicion that, the last time they did it, David didn’t have to bend down to give her access to his forehead.

“Oh,” David says, on a shuddery breath, like he’s astonished too. “Okay, better get on the road.”
Mrs Rose nods, and steps back, letting him and Patrick get into the car.

“Are your parents . . . okay?” Patrick asks, once the doors are closed.

“Um. I think so?” David peers at them through the windshield. They’re holding hands now, and waving. “I think maybe my mom’s dealing with the whole Crows thing and the whole Alexis thing by, like. Overinvesting in us? A little?”

“Huh. Okay.” He thinks about it. “Let’s make sure to call them from Birch Lake, then, so they feel more included.”

“That’s . . . a really nice idea,” David says, smiling. “Ten son-in-law points.”

“It’s not a very fair competition if you’re the one who decides how many points I get,” Patrick says.

“Speaking of your hometown,” David says, blowing right past that comment, “let me nav it for us.” He types Birch Lake into his phone.

“It’s really just one highway,” Patrick grins. “We drive on it till we get there. Plus you’re not gonna have reception for most of the drive, I hate to tell you.”

“What?” David puts his phone down in his lap as Patrick backs out of the motel parking lot. “But I made a playlist! On Spotify!”

“You could download it,” Patrick suggests.

“It’s a really long playlist! I would’ve downloaded it last night if you’d told me.”

Patrick shrugs. “Sorry.”

“Ugh.” David pokes at his phone. “Okay, we’ll see how far that gets before I lose service. Or run out of data.”

“I brought CDs,” Patrick suggests. “They’re in the back seat.”

David raises an eyebrow at him. “Okay, I will look at your CDs, Patrick. Pray for me.”

“I put some Mariah in there for you. And some Tina. The library had a sale.”

David kisses his cheek as Patrick makes the turn towards the highway. “You’re a good fiancé.”

“But do I get points for it?” David’s twisted around, trying to reach the CD binder behind the driver’s seat.

“Fiancé points can be redeemed for blowjobs,” David says, twisting back around again with the CDs in hand. “So it all works out, really. We don’t have to keep score.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

“I notice your guitar is also in the back seat,” David says. “Is there a plan for a rousing fireside singalong?”

“We might have a fire some night, yeah. Roast some marshmallows.” This mollifies David, and Patrick could let it rest there, but he wants to warn him, at least a little. “And then there’s the engagement party.”
David looks up from the CDs. “Your mom said they were hiring a local band for the engagement party,” he says, slowly. Patrick nods.

“They are. But, just so you know, I’m gonna sing you something.”

“Tina again?” David’s voice is teasing.

Patrick shakes his head. They turn onto the highway, and their speed starts to climb, past sixty klicks, past eighty, faster and faster, to take them back to where Patrick came from.

“It’s an original song. For you. I’ve been writing it for a while. And my cousin Neil helped me out.”

“You’re going to play an original song, dedicated to me, that you wrote, in front of your family and friends, most of whom do not know me at all,” David summarizes. “Do you understand why that is profoundly upsetting?”

Their speed levels off at one-ten, and Patrick reaches out for David’s hand. “Yeah. I do. Do you understand why I want to do it?”

David sighs, squeezing his hand. “Yeah. It would maybe be better for my heart if you weren’t so into the big romantic gestures.”

Patrick darts a glance at him, dry and disbelieving. “You love the big romantic gestures.”

“Yes, well, it would also be better for my heart if I wasn’t.”

Laughing, Patrick brings David’s hand up to kiss it. “It’ll be great,” he says, because he can feel it, the surety of it, deep down. Even if it doesn’t go to plan, even if a string breaks on his guitar mid-song, even if they get the flu, even if the power goes out or the lake floods or David inadvertently makes an enemy of his Great Aunt Elsie. It’ll be great, because it’s him and David, building their lives together, and the things they build are made to last.

It’s a long drive, and Patrick didn’t properly appreciate it last time, manic, depressed, sobbing, lost. This time, he notices that the landscape is beautiful, especially once they get past Nipigon and get a view of the lake. Patrick breathes in deeply, even though the windows are up, feels like the air he’s breathing is fresh, and new, and energizing. While David does his best to DJ with what he calls Patrick’s regrettable CD collection, Patrick tells him stories about his hometown, about growing up, about the places he used to go and the things he used to do. He even tells him the bad parts, the hard parts, the things he’s not proud of and the things he wishes had been different. David mostly listens, occasionally contributes a story of his own childhood, and asks Patrick questions: how old were you then? and did your team end up winning? and oh my god he sounds like such a waste of space. It’s something, to think his own history through David’s eyes, and as they pass through Thunder Bay and turn back north, he learns more and more about who he was, and who he is, just by letting David hear it.

“It’s not Ithaka,” Patrick says, after a little silence. David turns away from the window and looks at him.

“Birch Lake? Yeah, I would doubt it. I mean, I’m sure it’s beautiful, but I’ve been to the Ionian Islands.”


David rubs his arm with the palm of his hand. “I know.”
Patrick drives, and it doesn’t feel like going back. It feels like going forward.

Chapter End Notes

**Queen Anne’s Lace**, by Raymond Souster

It’s a kind of flower
that if you didn’t know it
you’d pass by the rest of your life.

But once it’s been pointed out
you’ll look for it always,
even in places
where you know it can’t possibly be.

You’ll never tire
of bending over to examine,
of marvelling at this
shyest filigree of wonder
born among grasses.

You’ll imagine poems
as brief, as spare,
so natural with themselves
as it take your breath away.

End Notes

Thank you all for coming on this wild and wonderful ride with me! I've been humbled and honoured by all the gorgeous comments and effusive support. To everyone who's felt seen or touched by this story: your comments have touched me, too. It means the entire world to me.

For fun:

- **Alan Cumming singing I Don’t Care Much**: my inspiration for that scene. This is my favourite recording, even though, as the top commenter says, it was filmed on a piece of celery.

- **Tan France dressing Hasan Minhaj**: I admit that I don't know anything about fashion and based David's outfit for Patrick on the outfit they settle on at the end. Also this video is just delightful overall.

If you enjoyed this story about queer community and you have the desire to do so and five bucks to spare, please consider donating to **Rainbow Railroad, LGBT Books to Prisoners**, the **Silvia Rivera Law Project**, or to your local LGBTQ2AIP-plus resource center, legal aid
project, charity, or shelter. Even a few bucks can do so much for these small, local organizations, and so can volunteering. Also consider checking out #transcrowdfund on twitter to help someone directly.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!