Bonfires! Breakups! All-ages night at the local club, underage drinking, and reminders of how everything tastes better when you're stoned.

Welcome to a tale of bros being bros, bros boning bros, and little bros being best. Where high school hockey is more the vehicle than the actual destination, and sometimes we all have to settle for a good face-punch being the most efficient form of communication. Come for the melodrama, stay for the dicktouching.
A FEW THINGS, Y'ALL:

1. Patrick Kane is human garbage. This is not up for dispute. That being said, this beast was begun in 2013 during the playoff run (Bruins/Pens game 3, right after the buzzer on period 2, to be precise), and for reasons that I hope are eventually clear, he wasn't erased entirely in The Great 2016 Rewrite. I just want to make it EXTREMELY CLEAR that he is human garbage in this story, as in life. I highly encourage use of the find/replace tool, if you feel so moved.

2. As noted above, this was begun in 2013. As a JOKE, people. A joke. Because nothing says, "Hey, I really want to spend the next three and a half years of my life writing and rewriting like 200k of high school hockey fic YEAH THAT SOUNDS LIKE A GREAT PLAN AND SOMETHING I HAVE TIME FOR." like footage of Patrice Bergeron and Evgeni Malkin rolling around on the ice after the buzzer and punching the crap out of each other. TL;DR team composition here is based on 2013 season.

3. Daniel Carcillo was the best, is the best, and will continue to be the best. I will fight the naysayers, please form an orderly line.

4. Please don't try to make sense out of the relative ages, you'll just hurt yourself.
October: Patrice

Patrice gets dumped on the 3rd of January in sophomore year.

It’s not like they’d been serious. It’s not even like they were really a couple. It’s not, Patrice reflects, even like Paillsy actually broke up with him. That would imply that Paillsy’d had the decency to bring it up himself when he clearly stopped wanting… whatever it was they were doing.

In reality, Patrice holds out until after the text from Paillsy begging off the plans they’d made for the fourth time in a week before he calls.

“Hey,” says Paillsy, and his tone sends the anxious weight in Patrice’s chest plummeting into his stomach. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” Patrice says, fidgeting. In the background he can hear snippets of music and choppy sound effects. “What’re you playing?”

The noises stop abruptly and Paillsy sounds sheepish when he says, “Uh, Soul Calibur. I was getting bored, though.”

“Oh,” says Patrice. He pauses. He very consciously doesn’t say anything like, Oh sure, but you’re somehow busy enough to cancel all our movie plans? Instead, he asks carefully, “So um. Like, is everything cool? With us, I mean.”

“Oh,” Paillsy starts, and audibly flounders. There’s a long silence and Patrice could cut in, prompt him, but the thought of helping Paillsy out with this makes him want to throw something. Finally he says, “I guess I just. I miss when we were friends.”

“We are friends,” says Patrice coldly, and gets a vindictive little thrill from the way Paillsy’s breath hitches uncomfortably in his ear.

“Yeah, but I meant-”

“This might’ve been a good talk to have before we fooled around, huh?” Patrice says, and his voice is flat and hollow and strange in his own ears. Getting pissed is so much better than the alternatives, and he clings to the heat of it starting to simmer under his skin.

Paillsy’s starting to get defensive when he shoots back, “Hey, that was-- That was okay, man. I mean, it was good, it was just… I don’t know if it’s what I want?”

“What?” Patrice asks quietly. “Me, or, like. Me being a dude.”

There’s another long silence, and Patrice can perfectly picture Paillsy sitting there on the saggy old couch in his family’s living room, XBox controller still in his lap, face doing that patchy-flushed thing it does when he’s upset.

“I really like you,” he says finally, so softly that Patrice has to strain to hear. “And I want to, like. I want to want that stuff. With a guy, with you, I mean, but I just. I dunno.”

“You just don’t.”

“No,” says Paillsy, and he really does sound sorry. “But I mean, I love being friends with you, man, can we. Can we just like, do that, go back, have shit be cool?”
“Do we have a choice?” Patrice snaps. “Nobody else on the team knows, it’d look pretty fucking weird if we just stopped speaking suddenly, huh? Unless you feel like letting them all know you messed around with a dude.”

“Christ, Bergy.” And now Paillsy sounds like he’s getting pissed, too. Good. “You really think I’m gonna be an asshole about that stuff? I’m being honest, I seriously do wish--”

“Yeah, okay,” Patrice interrupts him. Somehow Paillsy wishing he wanted to want Patrice actually stings more than if he’d decided to be a bigoted douchebag about it. “Fine. It’ll be fine. But I gotta go.”

“Oh,” says Paillsy, caught off guard. “Um, sure, I guess. But I’ll see you at practice?”

“Clearly,” says Patrice. He hangs up.

Somehow, being a caustic jerk at Paillsy hadn’t been quite as cathartic as he’d hoped. Mostly he just wants to throw up a little. Or maybe break his phone.

He doesn’t do either. He just goes to bed early, skipping dinner, and ends up telling Johnny Toews about it the next day, feeling every ounce the pathetic trainwreck that he is as he does it.

Johnny is not a trainwreck. He got Madison Tech’s varsity C at the beginning of the school year, along with being the only sophomore Patrice knows taking three AP classes, and he and Patrick have been a public item since the beginning of freshman year. Patrice would actively resent the guy on principle if they didn’t spend every Saturday morning co-coaching a kid’s soccer camp together.

“Danny Paille?” Johnny says, voice low under cover of the raucous shouts of third graders echoing through the gymnasium as they play keepaway. “You mean the defenseman from your team?”

Patrice nods miserably and fidgets with the lanyard on his whistle, watching from the sidelines as two little girls gleefully untangle from a head-on collision.

“Huh. I didn’t even know you were dating. Or into guys,” Johnny adds thoughtfully, casting Patrice a sidelong scrutinizing glance. “Dude, that fucking sucks, I’m sorry.”

“That’s kind of my point,” Patrice mutters, suddenly defensive. He’s not sure what he’d been expecting from Johnny, maybe some insight or empathy or something more than this sorry your life isn’t as well-arranged as mine bullshit. “Nobody else knows, and now we have to play together and hang out like everything’s normal.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says. “Practice always feels screwed up when Pat and I are fighting. Coach got super pissed and gave us a whole speech about it last time.” He looks really embarrassed now, which probably shouldn’t be as gratifying as it is.

“So how do you deal with it?” Patrice asks, and Johnny just shrugs.

“Dunno. Just try and forget about it, mostly. Like, the game is more important than personal shit while you’re out there, right? Focus on that.”

Patrice snorts, but Johnny doesn’t look like he’s kidding, so he just says, “Sure man. I guess.”

As it turns out, Johnny’s not wrong.

It’s not exactly easy to block it out in the beginning, especially not with Paillsy trying as hard as he does to stay in Patrice’s good graces and consequently making things exponentially more awkward.
than they need to be, but the simple truth is that Patrice is too busy to spend much time moping. When he’s not at practice, he’s picking up shifts in the tutoring lab with Looch, and he’s class treasurer on top of everything else.

Honestly, he thinks, it’s not like he actually has time to date, anyway.

This carries him through the school year and into the summer, when his and Johnny’s soccer camp gets officially made a year-round thing. He quits student government in the fall and takes on more tutoring shifts, and he gets named Causeway’s varsity captain during the second week of junior year.

“Hey,” says Johnny when Patrice mentions it, “congrats, man!”

Patrice shoots him a look, bending down to collect the last of the cones from this morning’s drills. They’ve got a two-hour timeslot in an actual soccer field now, out behind the old Civic Center gym, and it’s really nice except for how the equipment somehow seems to end up all over the place.

“Thanks,” he says dryly. “You sure you want to say that? You saw how last season ended for us.”

“Eh,” Johnny shrugs, unperturbed. “Look at it as an opportunity to turn things around. Boychuk was a good player, but it always looked like you were more of a leader with the A last year than he ever was with the C.”

“I guess we’ll see,” Patrice says, and tries to sound offhand rather than how he really feels every time he thinks about it, like he’s swallowed something wriggly.

Johnny just hums his agreement, taking the cones from Patrice and tossing them along with the bag full of soccer balls into the bed of his truck. He straightens up and smiles over Patrice’s shoulder. “Kaner’s here.”

Patrice turns around just in time to nearly get knocked over as Pat beelines for Johnny, rising up on tiptoe to plant a kiss on his lips before even bothering to say, “Hi there.”

“Hey,” says Johnny, face going uncharacteristically dumb and dopey. Patrice hides a smirk behind his water bottle. “How’d you get here?”

“Mom dropped me off,” Pat says, insinuating himself into Johnny’s space like there’s a gravitational pull and leaning up to kiss him again. Across the parking lot, Patrice catches a glimpse of an unamused frown through the windshield of a familiar blue Chevy as it turns toward the exit. “We were running errands and I asked if she could just drop me off since you guys were finishing soon. I texted you like five times, dude.”

Johnny frowns, even as Patrice can clearly see his hand working its way into Pat’s back pocket, keeping him close. “You know I have my phone on silent when we’re with the kids.”

“Um,” says Patrice loudly, before they can launch into one of their bickering standoffs. They both turn in unison to look at him, Pat looking a little surprised, like he’d forgotten Patrice was there. “Johnny, you still want to go to the diner for lunch, or..?” He trails off, looking between the two of them.

“Oh!” From the look on Johnny’s face, it’s clear he’d completely forgotten, but he glances down at Pat. “Sure, man. Is it cool if Kaner comes along?”

Right, because Johnny would definitely not just ditch out with Pat if Patrice said no. Sure.

“Yeah,” he says, “of course.”
Pat beams and slides up into the cab, squirming between the front seats to sit on the narrow back bench seat behind Johnny, magnanimously announcing, “You can take shotgun.”

“Thanks,” says Patrice, and tries not to notice as Pat leans up over the seatback in front of him to press his nose into Johnny’s neck as he starts the engine.

Johnny leans out of reach, trying to swat Pat away, grousing, “Cut it out, I’m driving.”

Pat just rolls his eyes and makes a face, sitting back just enough to keep his chin resting on the back of Johnny’s seat. Patrice makes a show of checking his nonexistent new text messages, and scrolling through Twitter for a minute.

After a moment or two of driving in silence, Johnny says, “So Patrice just told me, he got the C for Causeway.”

“Ouch,” says Pat, glancing over at Patrice, who feels his cheeks flush uncomfortably with righteous indignation. Sure, he’d said basically the same thing fifteen minutes ago, but they’re his team, and what does Patrick Kane know, he doesn’t even have an A. “I mean,” he amends, like he can hear Patrice’s thoughts, or, more likely, read them in his expression, “good luck, man. Maybe this year you guys’ll actually put up a fight before we kick your asses.”

“Dude,” Johnny snaps warningly, glaring at Pat in the rearview mirror, but Patrice just snorts incredulously.

“Yeah,” he says, “okay. And who’s gonna do that? I think I remember watching you bounce off Lucic and knock your head on the boards last time you tried to lay a hit on one of my guys.”

Stopped at a light, Johnny snorts what actually sounds like a laugh. Pat punches him in the shoulder. “Douche. Aren’t you gonna defend me or some shit?”

“What, while you’re doing so well on your own?” Johnny manages, still clearly trying not to lose composure. Pat just digs his knuckles in again. “Ow! Fucker. Christ, do you want us to crash?”

It’s a moot point, since they’re pulling into the diner parking lot as he says it, but Pat still huffs and sits back in his seat, crossing his arms over his chest. “Whatever,” he grumbles to Patrice. “It’s not like you’re way bigger than me.”

This, at least, is true.

“Sure. But that’s why you don’t usually see me out there trying to start shit with Bickell, or that Carcillo guy if I can help it. I like my teeth.”

Pat looks like he’s about to fire back, but Johnny interrupts before he can. “I’m starving. Are we done here, can we go in?”

“Yes,” says Patrice quickly, “me too. Let’s go eat.” He slides out of the truck, and Pat follows, although he keeps casting Patrice mutinous glances whenever Johnny seems distracted.

Patrice actually doesn’t mind Pat. He’s a good player, fun to compete against, and for all his faults he seems to make Johnny pretty happy. The passive-aggressive chip on his shoulder he’s been nursing for Patrice, however, is starting to get tired.

Once they’re seated at a booth near the window, Pat says, “I gotta piss,” and wanders off towards the restroom signs.
Johnny waits until he’s out of earshot before grimacing over the rim of his water glass at Patrice. “Sorry about that. I don’t know what his deal is sometimes.”

“Dude, it’s fine,” Patrice says, messing with a straw wrapper. “I’m not new. I know he gets all, like,” he waves a hand vaguely, trying to come up with the right word. “Territorial.”

“Territorial?” Johnny snorts, and he’s actually laughing now, unabashed. “What, over me? With you?”

Patrice raises his eyebrows. “Uh, yeah.”

“No way, man,” Johnny says. “Besides, he doesn’t even know you’re gay.”

“Right, because you guys have always been super reasonable about being in love with each other.” Mostly he’s referring to the incident last spring when Johnny had nearly knocked Joe Thornton through a wall at some Edmonton Municipal rager for making a loud comment about Pat being an overrated player. He knows Johnny, for all of his captainly poise, is still embarrassed about it, and he’d only really meant to tease, but the way Johnny’s cheeks flush all blotchy and red catches him off guard.

“Sorry,” he says, fixing Johnny with a disarming smile. “Too soon?”


“What stuff?” Patrice is completely confused for a moment, thinking back over what he’d said. “Oh, you mean looove?” he laughs, drawing out the word and grinning at how it makes Johnny go even redder. “Come on, man, you guys are totally stupid for each other, everybody knows that.”

“It’s not--” Johnny cuts himself off just in time as Pat returns from the bathroom. His face is still flushed, and Pat gives him a weird look as he sits down, bumping their elbows together on the tabletop.

“It’s not what?” he asks, glancing between them and settling on Patrice. “What’re we talking about? Why does he look like that?”

“Uh,” says Johnny stupidly, but Patrice cuts in.

“Oh, just the thing last spring at the Edmonton party, where Jon nearly decapitated Joe Thornton in your honor.”

Pat’s eyes light up and he grins wickedly over at Johnny. “Oh yeah,” he says. “I remember. That was fucking hot.”

Johnny glares at them both and mumbles something unintelligible into his iced tea. Patrice rolls his eyes and thinks, You’re welcome, asshole.

Even seeing Johnny every week, it’s the first time Patrice has ever given thought to the two of them as anything besides some kind of old-fashioned high school movie romance; as anything other than simple.

Thinking about it after Johnny drops him off at home, though, Pat climbing up to take Patrice’s seat next to Johnny as soon as Patrice’s feet touch pavement, it reaffirms his own no-dating decision. It just looks like work, and he has enough of that already.
“Dude,” Segs had told him after the last incident involving a girl in his biology class asking him to Homecoming. “That was Denise McClaren. That isn’t work, that’s a privilege. What the actual fuck is wrong with you?”

“Yeah,” Marchy had agreed, “I’m sort of a little embarrassed to be your friend right now.”

Which is why Patrice has the C, while Tyler Seguin and Brad Marchand are lucky if they turns leading warmup.
“Hey,” Pat says, as they’re turning onto the main road from Patrice’s cul de sac, “so uh. Your parents home?”

“Subtle,” Johnny tells him, and from the corner of his eye, he sees Pat’s lips quirk up.

“No, but seriously,” Pat persists, in that voice where he’s clearly trying to be all casual and slick. “You wanna watch a movie or something?”

They make out through Pineapple Express for the fiftieth time.

The far-off sounds of traffic from the highway a few blocks down and the wavering drone of next door’s lawn mower filter in to fill the silence, but they sound distant and smoothed-over; less real than the steady whoosh-whoosh of Pat’s breath against Johnny’s cheek, or the slow thudding of his own pulse in his ears.

After a long moment of this, of Johnny watching shadows waver across the ceiling and starting to wonder if Pat’s actually fallen asleep, Pat says, “So uh. Do you think that Bergeron kid is hot?”

Johnny stares up at the ceiling light fixture. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

“What?” says Pat, clearly affronted and rising up on an elbow to look Johnny in the face. Johnny seizes the opportunity to reclaim his arm, where it’s been wedged uncomfortably between Pat and the couch. “I’m serious. You guys seem all… I dunno. And he’s, you know. Yeah.”

“Wow,” Johnny says levelly. “Really glad you were able to clear that right up for me.”

Pat makes an aggravated noise and prods him in the hip.

“Fuck off, you know what I mean.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Dude, there is nothing to be jealous of.” As an afterthought, he lies, “He’s not even into guys.”

“Yeah, well.” Pat casts him a scrutinizing look, clearly not ready to let the issue drop. “Neither am I, except for you.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Johnny sits up abruptly, Pat nearly toppling off the couch with a yelp. “I fucking hate when you say that shit. It’s been almost two goddamn years, you need to get over it already, or--”

“Or what?” Pat asks, swooping in on the words like he’s been waiting for them. "What do you want from me, Jon?"

His eyes have hardened. He looks angry, sure, but with something else mixed in that Johnny can’t nail down, and it sets his teeth on edge. For a moment he wants to yell, wants to lash out and storm off and cater right into whatever this bullshit argument is that Pat’s clearly trying to stir up just to prove his point.

And just like that it’s all over. The anger wavers as quickly as it’d come, leaving only tiredness and a bitter, lingering aftertaste of anxiety.

“I want to go back ten minutes,” Johnny says quietly. “I want to not have this fight.”
And just like that, Pat’s back on top of him, climbing halfway into his lap and kissing him and mumbling, “No, no, I know, me too, I’m sorry. Was stupid.” And it’s so easy to let things lie where they fall, to just wrap arms around Pat and hang on.

They haven’t moved or said much by the time Johnny’s mom comes home half an hour later, Pat halfway draped over Johnny as they watch Fairly Odd Parents.

“Hey, Andree,” Pat says without looking up, and Johnny turns in time to see the politely incredulous little twist her mouth makes before she catches herself.

“Patrick,” she says, and then, “How was soccer, Johnny?”

“Eh,” Johnny shrugs. “Fine. Same as usual. Kids are picking stuff up so we got to try out some new drills today, that was fun.”

“Oh, wonderful. Was Patrice there?” She says it innocuously enough, but Johnny knows better, and a jolt of frustration re-awakens in the pit of his stomach. Next to him, Pat is very studiously looking at the television.

“Yeah, Mom,” Johnny says, turning back to the TV himself and giving Pat’s shoulders a little squeeze. “As always.”

“You should invite him for dinner one of these days,” she says, clearly unperturbed. “It’s been awhile, and I just saw his mother in Barnes & Noble the other day, she said he could do to expand his social life.”

“Awesome,” Johnny says in as steady a monotone as he can afford without actually starting a fight. “Hey, speaking of dinner, Pat’s gonna eat with us tonight, okay?”

There’s only the briefest of pauses before his mom says, “Sure, of course. Patrick, you’re always welcome. Johnny’s dad is on a fishing trip, it’ll just be the three of us.”

Pat is wire-taut against Johnny’s side, but he cranes his neck over the back of the couch to grin brightly at Johnny’s mother. “Sure, Mrs T. Thanks.”

“Anything we can do to help?” Johnny asks, doing his best to keep the grudging note out of his voice. It must work, because his mom offers an indulgent smile at the two of them.

“Sure,” she says. “There are a couple more bags of groceries left in the car, and then Johnny, if you wouldn’t mind going out back and spraying down the garden with the hose, that would be great.”

She’s gone before he can respond, so it feels safe enough when he mutters, “I meant help with dinner,” under his breath, making Pat giggle nervously against his side.

“Dude, I don’t have to stay,” Pat says, keeping his voice low, too, as Johnny turns off the TV and gets off the couch, stretching. “She seems pissed, I don’t want to make it worse.”

Johnny snorts. “She’s not pissed, she’s just… Whatever. I don’t know what her deal is, but I want you to stay. I mean,” he adds, “if you want to, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Pat intones, but smiles and leans up on tiptoe to catch Johnny’s mouth in a quick kiss that turns slow and deep as Johnny leans into it.

Pat moans quietly, quickly drowned out by clattering from the kitchen, and Johnny’s mom beginning to hum along with the radio.
He shoves Pat off, laughing. “Gross,” he says. “My mom’s home. Total bonerkill.”

Pat sticks his tongue out. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll go grab the rest of the groceries if you deal with the hose situation.”

He wanders off toward the front door while Johnny finishes straightening his shirt, putting a little extra sway in his hips and muttering so Johnny can hear him, “Like your mom being home’s ever stopped us before.”

Over chicken and salad forty minutes later Johnny’s mom says, “I meant to mention it earlier, but there are some more college brochures on the table in the hallway. They came in the mail today.”

“Okay,” Johnny says. He studies a green bean speared on the tines of his fork. “I told you guys, though, I want to go downstate for school.”

“Well, there’s still time to look over options before you decide,” she says curtly, looking up and meeting his eyes until he just nods and takes another bite to avoid saying anything else. The downside of this is that then she redirects to Pat, asking, “What about you, Patrick? What schools are you interested in?”

“Oh, I dunno,” says Patrick easily, and Johnny watches him shrug, wishing Patrick were feigning this nonchalance. “I haven’t thought about it a whole lot, you know? I mean, I thought I’d just work for my parents, maybe, at the dealership, but now I’m thinking I might go downstate with Johnny.”

His mother laughs shortly, and Johnny can see her trying to figure out whether or not Pat is joking.

“The business program, right?” Johnny asks Pat quickly, trying to catch his ankle under the table, but stubbing his toe on a chair leg instead. “You mentioned it might be useful if you do take over the dealership, and Southern has that business track.”

“Oh, yeah, uh-huh,” Pat agrees with his mouth full. He chews quickly and swallows before smiling brightly at Johnny’s mom. “But really just anywhere with a decent hockey program. I’m like Johnny, I’m pretty much cool so long as I get to keep playing.”

“Hm,” Johnny hears his mother say, as he concentrates studiously on locating every shred of carrot in his salad. Anything to keep from actually engaging. “Johnny, I don’t think that’s how you and I discussed things, is it? I was under the impression that hockey would be an extra bonus for you if you found an academic program you were interested in.”

He can actually feel Pat’s eyes on him, maybe even hear Pat’s neck crick as he turns his head so fast to stare.

“Uh,” says Johnny, “we um. Pat and I haven’t really talked about--”

“Dude, you said you wanted to go to Southern like, specifically for their rink,” Pat says, his voice riding that sharp edge of hurt anger teetering over the abyss of socially unacceptable behavior.

“Yeah,” Johnny agrees hesitantly, “but--”

“And you said that you’d go totally nuts if you couldn’t keep skating all the time.”

“I know!” Johnny snaps loudly, and feels Pat stiffen beside him. “I know,” he says again, more quietly this time, daring a glance up between the two of them. “But I haven’t figured anything out yet. Sorry.”
Pat returns to shoveling forkfuls of food into his mouth, although now it looks more like an excuse than actual appetite, while Johnny’s mother takes a sip of her wine.

“Well anyway,” she says after a moment, cutting through the tenuous silence, “Johnny, you should look through those brochures. There are some really nice options, and scholarship opportunities, too.”

“Thanks,” says Johnny shortly, and thinks lapse back into silence except for the clatter of cutlery and Pat’s chair faintly squeaking as his knee jiggles unconsciously under the table.

After a couple of excruciatingly long minutes, Pat finally says, “So how’s David liking Consol?”

Johnny’s mom brightens visibly. “Oh, he seems to love it so far,” she says. “He likes boarding, even though it’s only a forty-minute drive away, and I think it’ll be good for him not having to go through high school in his big brother’s shadow.”

She beams at Johnny pointedly as she says this, and he takes a gulp of water to avoid saying anything, like how David could probably give a fuck about whatever legacy she thinks Johnny’s established that might somehow hinder his video game and JV soccer agenda. Or like how last time David had called him, it’d been to gleefully announce that rich kids have terrible taste in weed.

“He’s there on a scholarship, right?” Pat asks, clearly warming to the topic as the mood around the table palpably eases.

Sure enough, Johnny’s mom visibly puffs up at the mention. “Yes, he is,” she says, helping herself to more salad. “The same one Johnny turned down, I don’t know if he ever mentioned?”

“Pat knows, Mom,” Johnny says pointedly, and she smiles airily at them both.

“Well then you know what an honor it is. We’ve been very fortunate to have such smart, talented boys.”

“Ugh,” says Johnny. His mom laughs.

“Always so humble, Jonathan. I’m glad at least one of you took the opportunity,” she says. “Now David just needs to keep his grades up.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Johnny mumbles, pushing his mostly-empty plate away so he doesn’t keep idly messing with his fork. Pat’s leg has stilled next to his, but somehow that leaves an even stronger sense of unease than the anxious fidgeting itself. “Hey, uh, I’ll start the dishes, Mom. Are you done with your plate?”

His mom surrenders her plate when he gets up to collect them, and Pat adds his to the stack. “You want help?” he asks.

“Sure, grab the glasses and the salad bowl,” Johnny tells him, and together they troop into the kitchen, leaving his mother to finish her wine and undoubtedly think up new ways to make him uncomfortable in front of his boyfriend.

Under cover of running water and clattering plates, Johnny says, “Hey man, I’m really sorry about that.”

Pat shrugs without looking at him, taking an inordinate amount of time scraping invisible gunk off a serving dish. “No big deal.”
“No, I mean.” Johnny opens and closes his mouth a couple of times, trying to pull the right words from the hodgepodge jumble of frustration and confusion ratcheting around inside him. “It wasn’t okay for her to start grilling you, and saying all that shit.”

“All what shit?” Pat says testily. “About how you don’t really care about college hockey, or how apparently you already have all kinds of plans I don’t need to get in the way of?”

Johnny stares at him. “You’re kidding, right? Pat, she didn’t say anything like that. She would never.”

“Yeah, not to my face, maybe,” Pat mutters, slamming glasses into the top rack of the dishwasher with enough force that Johnny’s surprised they don’t break.

“So wait,” he says, “you’re pissed about shit she didn’t actually say, but that you think she meant. How the hell is that fair?”

Pat snorts derisively. “Fair to who? I thought you just finished saying how it wasn’t okay for her to grill me or whatever, but dude, do you seriously not get how pissed she was that I want to go away to school with you? You’re like, her perfect son, and I’m just the dumbass who’s gonna fuck you up or whatever.”

His voice is rising, shaking dangerously, and Johnny hurriedly dumps in some detergent and cranks the knob on the washer, getting it going so the loud swishing whirr does most of the work covering up their raised voices.

“She never said that,” Johnny fires back. “She never said anything like that! You said--”

“I’m just reading between the lines,” Pat says, and his mouth is a petulant little crease, lips tight. “Not like it’s difficult.”

Johnny heaves a deep sigh, running a damp hand through his hair. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think she actually cares if you go to the same school as me.”

“Yeah,” Pat mutters without looking at him. “Sure, whatever.”

“And I do care about college hockey. You know that.”

“Uh-huh.”

He doesn’t shake Pat like he’s itching to, doesn’t try to force Pat to look at him, even with frustration rising in him like a tide.

“You shouldn’t come just for me, though,” Johnny adds, and the little flinch it elicits from Pat offers a caustic sort of satisfaction. He doesn’t trust himself with inflection when he adds, “You should go somewhere you want to go, not just because I’m there.”

Pat does look at him then, meeting Johnny’s eyes with such raw hurt that Johnny nearly drops the towel he’s holding. Half a second later, though, it’s already gone and he has to wonder if it was just his own anxiety playing tricks on him.

“Sure,” Pat says finally. “No, you’re probably right.”

His voice is so hollow, Johnny’s surprised it doesn’t echo.

He says, “Probably,” for lack of anything better.
Pat says, “I should go.”

“Oh,” says Johnny, glancing around at the wall clock. It’s barely even eight on a Saturday night, and neither of them have much homework due yet. “You sure?”

“Uh-huh,” says Pat. “I told Erica I’d help her with a thing.”

It’s easiest to just say, “Oh, okay.” To keep from pushing a clearly fragile excuse. To avoid dragging this stupid argument out any more than they already have. He’s not even sure why they’re pissed, just that Pat’s whole face seems shuttered now, and if Johnny has to keep looking at it he’s going to break something.

It’s easiest to just walk out to the front porch together when Pat’s mom shows up to get him, brushing the perfunctory goodbye kiss on Pat’s mouth the moment before they open the front door and Pat drops his hand in the headlight glare.
October: Geno

Chapter Notes

On the eve of some profound impending shittiness, I hope this brings you joy. <3

When Coach had called Geno into his office at the beginning of pre-season training, Geno had been sure he was about to get a lecture.

The bump up to top line wasn’t working, his production was down since the spring, his linemates couldn’t understand him on the ice through his accent... He could come up with an entire list straight off the top of his head of ominous reasons why Coach would want to speak with him privately.

It had taken him nearly half a minute, then, to form a response when instead Coach had told him, “So this isn’t official yet, Malkin, but I’d like to offer you the captaincy starting at the beginning of this season.”

“Um,” Geno said finally. “Come again?”

Coach grinned and settled back in his chair with a precarious creak. “I know it’s a little abrupt, sorry about that, but you knew you were a candidate, and after the leadership you showed during playoffs last year, and with the way I see you handle your responsibilities, I think this team would be lucky to see you take the role. What do you think?”

Geno said, “Um,” again, stupidly, still sifting around for the right words in the right language before things finally click into place. “Yes. Yes! Would like very much. Yes.”

He’d been grinning like an idiot, beaming, and Coach had laughed and said, “Great. We’ll make the announcement at the beginning of next week, so please keep this to yourself until then? I just thought I’d ask before we finalized anything, since I know you have a lot on your plate already.”

Oh right.

“I still can keep my work schedule?” Geno asked tentatively, and Coach nodded.

“Yeah, I know it’s a family obligation, and we can make sure any extra stuff you have to do fits in around that as much as possible. Sound good?”

Of course it sounded good.

Co-captaining with Sid for the last few games of the playoffs after Kunitz messed up his knee and had to sit out had been… Not fun, exactly, especially when they got knocked out a couple games later, but for the brief span Geno had found a new, energizing focus. Then there had been finals, and work, and all the end-of-season stuff, and in all the chaos he hadn’t even thought too much about what Kunitz subsequently graduating would mean.

Apparently what it means is that now Geno gets to be Consol’s varsity captain while the team flounders its way through one of the worst season starts in school history.

“It’s only three games,” Nealer tells him after the third loss, a 4-0 shutout to MTL. He plunks down
next to Geno in the dressing room after Coach stomps off to go talk with parents, and starts untying his skates. “We can make it up, man. Don’t look so freaked.”

Across the room, Fleury stalks past on his way to the showers,[58x802] dropping the pieces of his goaltending stick on the floor next to his stuff before disappearing around the corner.

“Dude,” mutters Glass, on Geno’s other side. Everybody else is eerily silent. Geno worries his bottom lip between his teeth where it’s starting to chap.

After an uncomfortably protracted pause, Neal says, “Hey, we play Causeway next week, right? They’re kind of a mess right now, too, and we kicked their asses last spring. Shit’ll get better.”

“Man, shut up,” Sid says, stuffing gear into his locker with way more force than necessary and causing an elbow pad to escape, rolling away across the floor toward Duper, who tosses it back to him. “Saying that stuff is just inviting trouble.”

Nealer makes a face at him once Sid’s back is turned. “Yeah, well, someone had to say something. It’s too fucking quiet in here.”

Geno flinches. Captain, right, he should probably be saying something right now. Something stoic and encouraging and good for morale. He clears his throat awkwardly, and a couple of the guys glance over.

“Doing better next time,” he says, stumbling around the words. “Practice hard this week, make difficult for Causeway.”

Everyone stares at him like they’re expecting more, and Geno starts to get uncomfortably hot and prickly in a way entirely unrelated to being covered in postgame sweat.

It’s Sid who finally comes to his rescue. “A bunch of their senior offensive guys graduated last spring. If we just keep our lines tight and push them around in their own end, things could look alright for us.”

There are some murmurs of agreement around the room, and for a brief moment the knot in the pit of Geno’s stomach eases a little. That is, until he realizes, and not for the first time, how much better suited to wearing the C Sid is. Sure, he’s generally awkward as hell, but at least most days he can string a full sentence together in English without tripping over himself, and the guys seem to want to listen to him, without a second thought.

Sid gives him a little smile that Geno returns weakly.

“Welp,” Letang says loudly. “I’ve got a handle of Cuervo stashed in my closet if anyone wants to follow me up to the dorms and start forgetting about this shitshow.”

Geno ends up bailing and driving home for an uneasy night’s sleep, waking up at five to help his mom open the restaurant.

“I would be tired after last night, too,” she tells him in Russian, smiling wryly as she sprinkles dried currants onto the dough she’s kneading before folding it over again. “I heard you come in late, did Coach give you a lecture?”

He grimaces, yawning again and reaching for his coffee with a floury hand. “Yeah, but nothing really bad. He’s probably saving his real speech for practice on Monday. The guys were really upset.”
“I saw Marc-André break his stick.”

Geno gives his wad of dough an extra-hard thump before setting it aside to rest. “Yeah, he was angry. Especially after the third one went in, even though I saw from the bench, that MTL kid just had a lucky angle. I don’t think Flower could’ve got his glove on it in time even if he’d seen it coming.”

His mom hums in agreement, standing back from the counter and smoothing hands down the front of her apron to get the flour off. “Did you tell him that?”

Staring down into his coffee, Geno shakes his head. “No,” he says quietly. “I couldn’t really figure out what to say.”

She sets her mug down and slips an arm around his shoulders, giving him a brief squeeze. “Give it time,” she says quietly. “They know you, they trust you.”

Geno doesn’t argue or try to refute this statement, just gives her a small, grateful smile that she returns, lines around her eyes softening momentarily before she’s back in motion.

“Come,” she says, dusting down her own work surface with flour from an old Folgers canister before passing it off to him. “Help me get one more batch rising and then you can go prepare the tea.”

It’s easy to just fall back into the familiar rhythm of mixing and stirring and kneading, letting his hands take over where his thoughts are too busy racing to trip over themselves. The restaurant is his second home, as much even as the rink is, with its heavy scents of butter and fruit and onion that cling to his clothes and his skin even after he bathes. He can think more clearly here, with his hands moving and his mother humming and the gentle steam-hiss of the samovar drowning out his worried thoughts.

He ends up coming in every morning that week on his way to school, helping his mother and the other part-time cooks prepare for the day. He finishes homework assignments perched on a stool at the cafe bar with a glass of hot, sticky-sweet tea while the sky slowly lightens outside and the first sleepy patrons shuffle through.

In the dressing room on Friday night before the game, he says, “Not so good at big speech.”

A few of the guys laugh, and Glasser jostles him with an elbow.

“That’s not good at speech,” he says again, “but good at wanting to win. And we good at playing, better than Causeway. Better heads on shoulders. So use heads, forget about bad games before and just have good game now, here.”

There’s a little pause, and then Nealer says, “Hell yeah!” and some of the other guys make noises of agreement. It wasn’t exactly the Independence Day speech he’d had to watch in ESL a couple years ago, but the mood in the dressing room is significantly lighter as they all dress out and get ready, jostling around each other and making a racket that only dies down when Coach comes out of his office.

He looks around at them all, seemingly chewing on his words before finally just stating, “We’ve talked about this. You know the drill with Causeway. Go take care of it.”

There’s a general chorus of whooping and Flower clatters his stick against the doorway menacingly as they all file out and down the long, dim hallway with its stale-ice smell, toward the bright-lit rink already thrumming with the chatter of a couple hundred spectators. Geno’s mom is there in her usual
spot high up behind his team bench, mouth open and shouting along with everyone else in a cacophony that blends into white noise in his ears.

Geno takes the opening faceoff against Causeway’s new captain, a smaller kid with a lot of nose behind his face shield and steady, dark eyes that narrow as they follow Geno’s movements. He has to look up to do it, readjusting his body and the grip on his stick to accommodate their size difference in the split second before the ref drops the puck, lunging for it and taking off as Geno is still following through.

It doesn’t take long for Consol to get the puck back, Tanger pasting Causeway’s left winger to the boards and swatting the puck away for Duper to collect. Glass scores on the next shift, but then Causeway evens it up a couple minutes later, and follows that with another, and then another before the period buzzer sounds.

The team troops back into the dressing room with an ominously familiar air of dread hanging over them all, that not even Coach’s threatening speech about getting their shit together and not letting themselves get tangled up in neutral ice does much to shake. Geno feels it settling in, weighing them all down and sapping morale. He can’t be the only one seeing flashes of the first few games before this; the smug, expectant faces on the opposing bench every time Consol fucks up, and, even worse, Coach’s darkening storm cloud expression behind their own.

It feels like they’ve barely had time to collect themselves and catch their breath before they’re being herded back down the tunnel to the benches. The glaring overhead fluorescents seem even brighter than they did before, and Geno’s eyes water a little in the glare, staring out at the fresh, gleaming ice and willing things to please, please just tilt their way. Just for a shift, that’s all they need, just enough to get their legs under them.

“Malkin.” Coach is leaning down, hovering close to his ear to be heard over the echoing din of the game. Geno nods to acknowledge him, eyes still following a play that has Sid making the Causeway goalie’s life really exciting for a minute. “The kid they keep trying to set you up against, Bergeron, you’re letting him get in too close. He’s just been chasing you around and waiting for opportunities and you keep giving them to him. You’ve got about twice his reach out there, so for Chrissakes, use it, okay?”

Flower makes another save, finally lunging to cover up, and the ref’s whistle sounds amid the answering appreciative clatter of sticks on either side of Geno along the bench.

“That whole line small,” Geno agrees. “Short. We try to spread out, separate, then box inside their zone, maybe.”

“Good plan,” Coach says, and claps him on the shoulder as play resumes. “Make it work, and make sure you’re actually talking to each other out there. Get ready now, you’re up.”

Geno throws himself onto the ice and takes off with new purpose between Duper and Nealer, and, sure enough, Causeway’s next shift has the almost comically small Bergeron line back out after them. The plan even works for awhile, too, with Geno not even having to aim hits so much as he just repositions and uses his body as a screen. It’s effective, and Bergeron starts getting pissed, taking risky swipes around Geno’s ankles for the puck until they tangle up and skid out.

Bergeron takes two for tripping and Geno assists Duper’s goal on their man-advantage. He can’t help smirking as he’s coming off the ice, goal light still flashing behind Bergeron’s pinched, resentful glower on his skate of shame back to the bench.

They lose anyway.
The one-goal deficit hangs over them for the whole third period, and even though they set up camp early in Causeway’s zone and skate circles around their defense, nothing quite seems good enough. The final buzzer sounds over a mad scramble around Causeway’s goal mouth, all six of Consol’s attackers making desperate bids with the puck. Geno can hear it loud and clear from the bench when Sid’s final attempt rings off the crossbar with four seconds left.

In the locker room, Coach says, “That was good pressure in the third. I want to see three periods of that next week. We’ll go over details on Monday.”

He leaves them to it, and although the atmosphere in the dressing room isn’t nearly as defeated as last week, Geno almost wishes Coach had yelled. Or lectured. Or something that would leave Geno feeling as though there were nothing left to say.

So he wouldn’t have to stand up himself, finally, dropping his towel on the bench and saying, “We are better than that.”

The guys all look at him, a crowd of pensive faces all trained on Geno as he adds, “Coach say that was good effort, but we still lose. That good enough for anybody here?”

There’s a collective muttering of “No,” and “Uh-uh,” and “Fuck that,” and Geno is actually glad to see the general level of unrest heighten; the anger set in. Good. Let them get mad. Let them stew in that for a little while, and maybe it’ll mitigate some of the cloying panic and despair that seem intent on dogging the team as a whole through the first month of the season.

At least, that’s the theory Geno’s working from as he leaves the dressing room that night.

He’s never been a very angry person, it takes a lot to set him off, but the slow build has been mounting and he can feel it like a rubber band pulled tight now and ready to snap. There’s something much more real in this than in pep-talks and rallying speeches; something raw and stinging sharp as a fresh wound that clears his head more effectively than the chilly October air whipping through the open window as he drives home.
October: Patrice

There’s a club, Avec, right on the township line between Madison and Causeway, that puts on a sixteen and over night every Thursday for the LGBTQ crowd. It’s one of those things that nobody really openly acknowledges, yet somehow everybody knows about.

Inside, it’s relatively stereotypical, or at least Patrice assumes it is. He doesn’t exactly have a wealth of experience with these things, but thumping bass rattling the glasses over the bar and the dim, warm lighting occasionally fractured by multicolored strobes seems about on par with what CW dramas have taught him.

It’s just after 8 o’clock, but there are already a fair number of bodies moving around on the cramped dance floor. He skirts around them, casting a cursory glance for anyone he knows, and beelines for a stool at the bar.

“Um,” he says, as the girl behind the counter gives him an expectant look, all of a sudden struck feeling completely self-conscious and out of sorts. “Just a diet Coke, please?”

“You wanna open a tab or pay now in cash?” she asks, sounding bored.

Patrice fumbles in his pocket, coming up with a crumpled twenty and holding it out for her. “Cash, I guess,” he says, and breathes an inward sigh of relief as she turns away to get his change and fill a glass.

“New to this, huh?” says someone next to him, and Patrice turns awkwardly on his stool, squinting in the low light.

The guy is big, and vaguely familiar, towering over Patrice with a wash of 5 o’clock shadow over his chin and an unironically friendly smile.


“No,” says Vaguely Familiar Guy. He tips a glass of something clear and fizzy at Patrice in salute. “Always nice to see new faces, even if they’re rival ones. You play hockey at Causeway, right?”

The bartender sets Patrice’s Coke down in front of him, and he grabs for it, glad for something to do with his hands. He says, “Yeah, uh. Bergeron.”

“Right!” The guy holds out a hand to shake, firm and sure and absolutely unperturbed by Patrice’s stiffness. “Patrick, right? I’m Brandon. Uh, Bollig. Number 52. Like half my team is Brandons at this point.” He sounds proud.

“Patrice,” Patrice quietly corrects.

“Right,” Patrice, Bergeron.”

“Right!” The guy holds out a hand to shake, firm and sure and absolutely unperturbed by Patrice’s stiffness. “Patrick, right? I’m Brandon. Uh, Bollig. Number 52. Like half my team is Brandons at this point.” He sounds proud.

“Patrice,” Patrice quietly corrects.

“Right, yeah. Sorry, we have a Patrick, too. Two, if you count coach.” He takes a sip of his soda and beams.

“Madison Tech?” Patrice guesses, shrewdly.

“Yup.” Another proud grin. “Right, I probably should have led with that.”

“Yeah, uh.” Patrice hesitates a second, turning his glass round and round between his hands until his fingers are chilled with the condensation. “If it could not get back there, or, um, anywhere, actually,
that I’m here, that would be … that would be really great.”

Brandon actually laughs at that, tipping his head back and guffawing in a way that makes Patrice’s hackles go up, drawing in on himself and already starting to mentally list off alibis and excuses.

“Hey,” Brandon says, when he sees Patrice’s face, “no, sorry, I’m not laughing at you. I guess I’m laughing at … I don’t know. All of this,” he waves a hand around to indicate the club, the people dancing, the strobe lights, Patrice isn’t entirely sure what, exactly. “Nobody’s interested in blowing your cover, dude.”

Patrice glances around. He takes a sip of his Coke and laughs nervously. He says, “Sorry, man. I dunno, I’m just not used to…” he trails off, waving a hand the same as Brandon just did, and shrugs.

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” Brandon says easily. Seriously, I get it.”

He smiles, softer this time, and Patrice smiles back.

They’re quiet for a moment, sipping their sodas while the music thuds around them, and then Patrice says, “Hey, weren’t you the guy who beat the shit out of that one kid from Glendale last year?”

Brandon laughs again, loud and raucous, but shakes his head. “Who, Paulie? Nah, I just roughed him up a little. We’re friends, I think he just gets jealous I see more ice time than he does.”

“I heard you broke his nose,” Patrice says, incredulously.

“Nah,” Brandon says again. He sets down his empty glass and leans back against the bar, swiveling aimlessly on his stool in time to the music. “Though that might’ve fixed it up a little. I just knocked him down and made his face leak a bit. He came out and partied with us after the game.”

“Man,” says Patrice, “I’m kind of impressed. My friend got into it with one of your guys, some freshman kid, like, two weeks ago, and he still hasn’t let it go.”

Brandon grins slyly. “Who’s your friend?”

“Brad Marchand,” Patrice says, after a second’s hesitation, wondering if maybe this was a terrible topic to bring up.

Brandon looks suddenly wistful. “Yeah, him and Shawzy. I remember. Andrew still wants to tear Marchand’s head off. He gets all riled up if you mention it.”

“Uh … huh,” Patrice says. Brandon just shrugs. Behind him, the bartender pushes a refilled glass toward his elbow.

On the dance floor, someone breaks away from the crowd and saunters over towards them. Patrice isn’t sure he’s ever seen someone saunter, or even that before now he’d really known the meaning of the word, but something about the combination of a tight vest over buffalo plaid and real, actual cowboy boots seems to bring it home for him.

“How,” Cowboy says to Patrice, an offhand sort of get-out-of-my-way greeting and dismissal all in one as he leans in to flag down the bartender. Then he pauses, leans back, and does a very obvious reassessment that makes Patrice feel like he’s suddenly sitting on a bar stool in his underwear. He smiles, but it’s not anything at all like Brandon’s easy, friendly grin, and Patrice is pretty sure he’s never been on the receiving end of this much undisguised intent, or, for that matter, involved in such a glaring cliche of a situation.
“Hey,” he says again.

Patrice says, “Hi,” and glances back at Brandon for help, but Brandon is looking suddenly very busy with his face in his glass. “What’s up?”

“Not much,” says Cowboy. He collects the full glass the bartender shoves at him and passes her a five in return, telling her, “Keep the change. You wanna dance?”

It’s a second before Patrice realizes the last part was meant for him, and he glances around stupidly to where the girl’s already wandered off down the bar to refill someone else. “Sorry, I don’t know how,” he blurts, the first thing out of his mouth before his brain really catches up, but the guy just leers a little more.

“No worries,” he says smoothly. “Come find me if you decide you want to learn.” He reaches out and lets his fingertips rest for a second on Patrice’s knee, just a moment’s pressure that somehow still lingers much longer than the touch itself. “Hey, Brandon.”

“Hi, Carey,” Brandon mutters, still looking immovably occupied, now with fishing a cherry out of the bottom of his glass.

Patrice glances back and forth between them, but Cowboy just smiles serenely and, collecting his drink, heads back into the crowd.

“Carey,” says Patrice, once he’s gone, and Brandon has reemerged from his struggle with the cherry. “Like, MTL’s varsity goalie Carey Price?” He can still kind of feel the ghost of that brief fingertip pressure and it’s doing complicated things to the nerves jumping in his belly.

“The very same,” Brandon says flatly, casting a glance in the direction Price had disappeared.

Patrice fidgets uncomfortably, twirling his straw between two fingers. “I take it you guys aren’t friends, then.”

Brandon gives another of those snorts, derisive yet genuinely amused, and says, “Eh, no, we’re not. But we’re not enemies. Or, I don’t think we are. Not sure what he’d tell you, but the truth on my end is that he’s just pissed I’m not pissed he won’t hook up with me. He’s got this whole thing about…” he trails off, waving a hand vaguely. “Status fucking.”

“Status fucking.”

“Yup.” Brandon raises his glass in salute. “And you rank, apparently. Congrats, man.”

“Uh,” says Patrice, still worrying at his straw. “This all sounds … really complicated.”

“Nah,” says Brandon. “It’s really not. And,” he adds, grinning, “You should totally go for it. I mean, if you’re into it. If that’s why you’re here. He can be kind of a douche, but I don’t think he’s a terrible person.”

Patrice frowns, staring out at the dance floor. He thinks he can see cowboy boots among the forest of moving feet in the flashes of fractured confusion offered by the colored strobe.

“I’m honestly not sure why I’m here,” he says, glancing up at Brandon, who just shrugs.

“Not like you need a reason,” says Brandon, and something in Patrice clicks tenuously into place.

“Yeah,” he says at last, and then laughs a little at the way Brandon’s eyebrows hike up. “Uh, I’ll,
“I won’t wait up,” Brandon calls after him.

It doesn’t take him long to find Price, wending his way through swaying hips and tangled arms until Patrice sees him dancing with a kid he recognizes as one of MTL’s defensemen. He breaks away when he sees Patrice, though, and the other guy fades off into the crowd, flashing a grin at them both as he goes.

“Am I interrupting?” Patrice asks in Price’s ear, shouting to be heard over the tower of speakers behind them.

Price shakes his head, slipping effortlessly into Patrice’s space with a hand resting on his hip. “It’s cool, that’s just my boy, PK.”

Price is swaying, hasn’t stopped moving, with the hand he’s got on Patrice migrating innocuously around his hip and slipping into his back pocket, and Patrice tries to match his rhythm, leaning in a little so Price’s moving them both. He’s not really sure what the explanation about PK is supposed to mean, but he nods anyway, letting Price pull him closer until he can feel Price’s breath on his cheek.

“So how far to your truck?” Patrice asks, and Price shrugs casually.

“Nice ride,” says Patrice, for lack of anything better coming to mind, and Price shrugs casually.

“Birthday present.”
He’s pressing back into Patrice’s space before Patrice can think of what else to say, how he’d even respond to that, and it’s much simpler to just follow the lead. Everything feels eerily quiet after the noise in the club; contained and encapsulated. What he’s doing here and his everyday normal life are comfortably adjacent, safely separated by locked Rubicon doors.

Price kisses down his neck, then pulls back, looking at Patrice for so long that it starts to make his palms itch. Finally, Price smiles. “Jesus shit, you’re hot,” he says, and ducks back in to suck a spot behind Patrice’s ear.

“Oh, I, uh.” Patrice laughs self-consciously, curling fingers in Price’s hair reflexively as his teeth sink in. “Fuck, you too.”

Price chuckles, a low, vibrating pulse against Patrice’s throat. “Yeah.”

He looks up again, smirking, and Patrice can’t entirely tell if he’s joking or serious, so he just grins back, shifting further into Price’s space.

“What’re you into,” Price asks, breath hitching a little as Patrice finds his earlobe, darting his tongue along the shell and following with teeth.

“I like, um,” Patrice hesitates, thinking.

“Fingers,” he says finally. “I like getting fingered. I mean, if you’re cool with that.”

Price smiles. His eyelashes droop in a way Patrice is sure he’s got to practice in front of a mirror every morning. “Yeah,” he says. “I’m down with that.”

“How about you?” Patrice asks, mostly as an afterthought. Price is already making quick work of his fly and pushing him back sideways on the seat, tugging his pants down around his ankles where they bunch awkwardly over his heels. In retrospect, wearing his tightest turquoise skinnies might not have been the most practical plan.

Price shrugs. “I’m not super picky. I like fucking, I like fingering. Not really into giving head, but I like getting it,” he says, as Patrice finally manages to extricate himself from his pants entirely, getting his legs spread comfortably so Price can fit easily in between them. He’s oddly compact, for someone already so tall and lanky, like he knows where every inch of his body is at all times.

Patrice moans when Price’s fingers brush over his dick, already embarrassingly hard against his stomach. Price doesn’t linger with the touch, though, reaching over instead to dig around in the seat-back pouch and coming out with a little packet of lube. One of the sample-sized single use things.

He laughs when he sees Patrice’s face. “What? I get handfuls of them from our guidance counselor. I think this one’s apple flavored.”

“Do this often?” Patrice asks, and Price just shoots him a wry grin.

“Probably not as much as you’re thinking right now,” he says simply, utterly unperturbed as he tears the corner off the packet with his teeth and squeezes some onto his fingers. He’s right, Patrice can almost instantly smell the sharp, chemical-sweet fake apple, like a Jolly Rancher candy.

He leans down and kisses Patrice again, deep and slow and with a lot of tongue, that complements the slick, wet press of his first finger as he slides it in. Patrice stiffens, moans into his mouth, and then wills himself to relax into it. It’s been awhile, but he knows this routine; appreciates enough the sensation of simply being filled and stretched that he doesn’t mind so much the aching burn of it when Price adds a second.
The surprise comes when Price crooks his fingers, pressing in a little deeper and then dragging out at a perfect upward angle that leaves Patrice’s hips bucking off the seat and pressing back for more.

“Shit,” he manages, panting. “Shit, yeah. Just like that. Like that, right there.”

Price does it again, looking increasingly self-satisfied as Patrice’s hips stutter up, riding out the sensation. It’s not that Paillsy had never managed to find his prostate before, but beyond some porn videos here and there for reference, it had mostly felt like navigating without a compass.

Price seems to have a built-in GPS, leaning in close and shifting the angle until he hits it in long, sweeping strokes, only pausing to add more lube.

“Think you could get off from just my fingers?” Price asks after a minute or two more, and Patrice nods, a little disoriented. He’s too far gone to care about being embarrassed. “Do you wanna? Or do you want me to jack you off, too?”

It’s already so much, he’s so easy for this that he comes before he can form an answer, turning his face into the upholstery of the truck seat. When he looks back, Price’s still half-curl ed over him, watching him and looking thoroughly pleased with himself. Patrice grimaces.

“Shit. Sorry. I meant to give you more warning before that happened. Gross.”

Price just shrugs and grabs what looks like an old gym towel from under the passenger seat, tossing it to Patrice to clean himself off with. “It’s fine,” he says simply, and leans back down to kiss him, deep and completely filthy in a way that catches Patrice off his guard a little, even after everything else.

Price kisses him with purpose, like it’s personal. Like he’s catching Patrice where he lives and turning all the lights on.

Patrice ends up sucking him off.

He never expects to like giving head as much as he actually does. He always thinks it should be weirder, or he had, in his limited previous experience. But mostly it’s just hot, with the way Price tangles fingers in his hair and isn’t afraid to ask for more, thrusting his hips up and fucking into Patrice’s mouth a little once they’ve both settled into a comfortable rhythm.

He’s polite enough to give Patrice’s shoulder a little pat when he’s about to come, shifting so his bare ass squeaks unflatteringly against the new leather, breathing loud through his nose. “Off,” he says quickly, “off, man. I’m gonna-”

Patrice ducks back and presses the already sticky towel into his hand, twining his own fingers around Price’s as they jerk him off the last couple strokes together.

They make out for a few more minutes, lazy and reluctant to move, even in the rapidly cooling, cramped truck interior, until finally Patrice thinks to check his phone.

“Holy shit,” he groans. “It’s nearly eleven? Fuck, I have to be home in like, half an hour.”

Price’s already back to sitting, flicking on the overhead light to rummage around and return Patrice’s pants to him.

“Hey,” he says, “you’re fine. How far away do you live?”

“Just a couple exits down,” Patrice says, “but I hadn’t meant to stay out this late. My curfew’s not until eleven thirty, but I told my parents I’d be home by ten-ish. Shit.”
He expects Price’s expression to waver at the mention of parents, or even the curfew, completely beyond giving a fuck about seeming like some kind of goody-goody at this point. Price’s expression doesn’t change, though. He doesn’t say anything douchey, just asks, “Can you text them or something?”

“Nah,” says Patrice, tugging on his shoes before running hands distractedly over his shirt, trying to smooth the wrinkles. “It’ll be fine, so long as I get home soon.”

“Cool,” says Price. His hair is sticking up at all angles and his previously immaculate dress shirt is unbuttoned and disheveled, but it suits him; he somehow looks even more elegant, lounging back against the seat as Patrice opens the door. “I’m Carey Price, by the way.”

“I know,” Patrice says, throwing him a little smirk. “I’m Patrice Bergeron.”

“Yeah,” says Price. “I know.”

They grin at each other for a moment, and then Patrice ducks his head, laughing and holding out a fist for Price to bump. He does, then uses it to tug Patrice back in and give him a quick peck on the lips.

He says, “Okay, man. See you around.”

It sounds more like an invitation than a dismissal.
October: Johnny

The argument with Pat leaves a heaviness in Johnny that rides with him through the rest of the weekend and out the door on Monday morning. The insecurity and confusion feel like uncomfortable clothes he can’t take off; something bright and obvious and clashing with the rest of him, ill-fitting and obvious.

His mother frowns as he passes her on his way out the door.

“Did you eat?”

“I have a couple granola bars in my bag, and a protein shake,” he tells her, which doesn’t do much to change her expression.

“You should leave time to eat a real breakfast,” she says, for a countless time. And for a countless time, Johnny rolls his eyes at her turned back.

“I’d rather just sleep the extra half hour.”

“I know,” she says, and leaves it at that. Johnny returns her tight smile before shutting the door behind him.

Pat is waiting on the curb outside his house when Johnny pulls up, backpack sagging from one shoulder and a travel mug in each hand.

“Tea,” he says by way of greeting, handing one of the mugs over to Johnny.


I wasn’t even sure I should be picking you up this morning, he doesn’t say. Or if you’d want me to.

“No problem,” Pat says, stowing his own mug and making a show out of locating and buckling his seatbelt, eyes down.

Johnny reaches for his hand, once he’s situated, tangling their fingers over the emergency brake as he drives. He’s glad for the excuse to look straight ahead, not to look over at Pat.

Pat curls his fingers with Johnny’s, though, giving a little squeeze, and Johnny can’t help but notice from the corner of his eye how Pat relaxes more in his seat.

“How’d Jess’s science project thing turn out?” Johnny asks, for lack of anything better.

Pat pauses, having to think a moment before answering. “Oh! Oh, yeah, that. Uh, it came out pretty good, I guess. She did a whole thing on Mars with a painted diagram and everything, and used actual potatoes for the moon thingies.”

“Phobos and Deimos?” Johnny asks, with an amused little smirk. “Dude, you helped her do it and you didn’t even learn anything?”

Pat tries to tug his hand free to swat him, and Johnny laughs. The anxious weight melts away, and he’s just glad to be around Pat again.

“What was that for?” Johnny asks, when Pat leans over and plants a kiss on his cheek.
“I just wanted to,” Pat shrugs. He stays pressed in close even as he adds, “Stopped your lameass chirping, didn’t it?”

They’re still sniping and heckling each other as Johnny pulls into the student lot and parks, but as soon as the engine’s off he leans over to catch Pat’s mouth, kissing him slow and sweet and deep.

“...Huh,” Pat says when they pull apart. “Hey, fuck class. Skip homeroom with me and I’ll blow you in the field house.”

Johnny laughs again, but this time it’s punctuated with another quick peck to Pat’s lips and his hand on the door. “Very funny,” he says, sliding out.

“So wasn’t kidding,” Pat mutters, and then, “Hey, Bry!” to someone emerging tenuously from an older-model Honda behind a pile of books, binders, and a McDonald’s bag.

He bounds over to help Bickell extract a stack of books from his back seat, Johnny trailing along behind, hazarding a sip of his still-steaming tea and doing his best to brush past any lingering sense of overwhelming relief.

By late afternoon, the morning’s worries are a distant memory, pushed aside by quizzes and lectures and homework assignments. Even so, the day still feels off, somehow. Weird and heavy and putting Johnny on edge, like he’s missing something, but can’t remember what.

It makes him irritable and testy, and he nearly bites Dan Carcillo’s head off when he catches up with Johnny in the hall after last bell.

“What?” Johnny snaps, and Dan snatches back the arm he’d flung around Johnny’s shoulders, eyebrows hiking under the long, unkempt hair swept across his forehead.

“At ease, soldier,” Dan says. He falls into step as Johnny keeps walking. “I was just going to see if you wanted to go grab coffee or something before practice, but maybe you don’t need any more caffeine right now.”

“Ha ha,” says Johnny, flatly. “No, that’d be cool. Wanna take my truck?”

“I’ll drive,” Dan says. “I just need to move all my crap off the front seat for you.”

He shovels what looks like half a library, a ragged gym bag, and a handful of loose, unlabeled CDs into the back of the prehistoric little Toyota two-door, and pats the seat for Johnny to get in.

“Where should we go?” Johnny asks. “The Starbucks up the street is gonna have a line around the block right now.”

Dan shrugs. “We’ve got over an hour. Let’s take a roadtrip.”

They’re quiet as Dan drives, patiently navigating the heavy after school traffic congestion while he taps fingers on the wheel in time with something moody and acoustic emanating from the rattly car speakers.

“You cool, Cap?” Dan asks, startling Johnny out of staring out the window at nothing.

Johnny shrugs. “ Weird day.”

“I saw Pat at lunch,” Dan says. “He was sorta quiet, too. You guys doing okay?”

Johnny narrows his eyes suspiciously. “Is this a coffee run, or a counseling session?”
Dan grins. “Can’t it be both? I mean, you don’t have to talk to me, dude. It’s fine.”

This is precisely why Johnny appreciates Dan, as much as he simultaneously resents the crap out of him.

“I don’t want to,” Johnny grates out, as Dan stares placidly at a red light. Johnny huffs an exasperated sigh. “I just don’t know what the fuck is going on with him, like, ever! He gets all pissed at me about shit, like I’m supposed to read his mind or something, and then bails before we even talk about anything, and the next time we see each other it’s like nothing ever happened. Only, it’s not like anything actually got resolved, and I still have no fucking idea what’s going on.”

“Well,” says Dan, after a long pause. The light turns green and they start moving again with the steady flow of traffic. “Have you tried asking him?”

“Ask him what?” Johnny says, maybe a bit more snappishly than he’d intended. Dan looks unperturbed.

“Well, I mean,” Dan says, “If you don’t know what the fuck is going on with him, or the two of you, or whatever, wouldn’t it just make sense to ask?”

“It’s not that simple,” Johnny says. “It’s not, I mean. I can’t just. I don’t know. We don’t do that shit.”

“Talk to each other?”

“About our feelings and crap, yeah. Not really.”

They drive in silence for a few blocks, Dan turning them off the main thoroughfare and onto a smaller residential side street. Finally he says, carefully, “Well then I can see how that would make it difficult to know what’s going on, yeah.”

“You’re fucking hilarious,” Johnny tells him.

“I’m not trying to be funny,” Dan says, patiently. He throws on his blinker to make a left turn into a Starbucks drive-through, and casts a sidelong glance at Johnny through his hair. “I’m saying, it’s gotta be pretty fucking tough to have any idea what’s going on in a relationship if neither of you ever talk about shit. I can see why it’d be driving you crazy.”

“We were always fine before,” Johnny mutters morosely, digging in his jacket pocket for some cash he forks over to Dan as they pull up to the speaker. “Get me a grande iced mocha.”

Dan puts in their orders and pulls through to the window, neither of them saying anything else until he’s paid and handed Johnny his drink.

“I don’t know,” Dan says, like there’d never been a pause. “I’ve seen you guys fight. Kind of a lot, actually.”

Johnny takes a long sip of his drink to avoid answering for as long as he can.

“That’s different,” he says, when he can’t think of anything more articulate. “It was never about big stuff.”

Dan says, “Huh.” He takes a contemplative sip of his coffee, but doesn’t extrapolate.

making me feel like a fucking idiot.’’

Dan sighs. ‘‘I’m not trying to make you feel like an idiot. I just don’t really know what else to say, if you guys don’t wanna actually talk to each other.’’

‘‘I don’t remember asking for your advice in the first place,’’ Johnny grumbles. Dan just shrugs and drives and sips his coffee, looking straight ahead over the wheel.

‘‘How long’ve you guys been together now?’’

Johnny shrugs. ‘‘I dunno. Like, almost two years, I guess? I think we officially started dating about halfway through freshman year, but there was awhile before that.’’

‘‘Yeah,’’ Dan nods, fondly. ‘‘You guys were so fucking cute, it was stupid.’’

‘‘Gee, thanks,’’ Johnny tells him, and makes a face when Dan takes his eyes off the road to beam at him. ‘‘I just remember being freaked out we’d get kicked off the team or something.’’

‘‘Coach isn’t dumb,’’ Dan says, and Johnny wishes he shared Dan’s nonchalant assurance on the subject. ‘‘You both played great, and I remember Seabs threatening death and dismemberment to anyone who gave you guys shit.’’

Johnny’s face still flushes hot at the memory. Seabrook had addressed the room after their first game on the varsity team, he and Pat still in the room and sitting side by side in mortified silence. It’s not as though they’d been going out of their way to keep things quiet, or even subtle, but somehow Johnny had never let himself think too much about their accountability, now that they were playing on a team together. Especially a team like Madison Tech’s varsity squad, that people actually paid attention to and talked about.

Pat still doesn’t know about afterward, when Johnny had gone to Coach and offered to break off the relationship. It was new, anyway, and the team was more important. Or, that’s what he’d tried to say, before Coach had cut him off and said that so long as they kept their personal shit off the ice and kept playing well, he didn’t care what the hell they did in their free time.

He’d considered extending the offer again when Coach had handed him a sweater with a big, bold C emblazoned on the chest at the beginning of Sophomore year, more out of posterity than anything. When he’d really thought about it, though, he’d felt sick.

‘‘I don’t like everybody being in my business like that,’’ Johnny says, more to himself than to Dan, who snorts.

‘‘Well, too bad for you, you share a dressing room with a bunch of the nosiest fuckers I’ve ever met.’’

‘‘No kidding,’’ Johnny mutters. ‘‘But everything feels different this year. We have to think about scouts later in the season, and college and stuff. It’s like, I don’t know, it’s like Pat doesn’t realize we’re not going to just always be here, playing for Madison and dicking around.’’

‘‘Hm,’’ Dan says, and his tone forces Johnny to glance over at him. For the first time since Johnny got in the car, Dan looks reluctant to finish his thought.

‘‘What?’’ Johnny demands.

‘‘Dude, I don’t know,’’ Dan says. ‘‘Maybe you were right, this is seriously none of my business.’’

‘‘No kidding,’’ Johnny agrees, glaring. ‘‘But you should’ve thought about that before you opened
“Ouch,” Dan says. “Fine, asshole. I just can’t help wondering if you aren’t, like, maybe starting to outgrow him a little bit?”

“Fuck you,” Johnny snaps, reflexively. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No,” Dan agrees. “You’re right. I probably don’t.”

Johnny glares some more, unable to come up with anything more intelligent to say.

“I guess,” Dan says, carefully, “maybe that’s why it might be a good idea for you to at least try talking to him about this shit. You’re obviously really committed, so doesn’t that kind of commitment deserve the chance to, like, grow and mature and shit along with the two of you?”

“Thanks, Dr. Phil,” Johnny says, making a face.

Dan punches him in the shoulder, hard enough to make Johnny wince. “Fuck off, asshole. AP Psych is my favorite class right now, I’m learning a lot. This stuff is legit.”

“Well, I’m not your fucking guinea pig to practice it on,” Johnny says, grumpily, even if there’s no real venom in the words.

“I’m not practicing anything,” Dan says. “But fine, you can figure your own shit from now on, I won’t bother you.”

He’s got a smile playing at the corners of his mouth, and Johnny rolls his eyes.

“Oh, please. We both know that’s not true.”

Dan mock-toasts with his coffee. “You’re gonna miss me so much when I graduate in the spring.”

“Also not true,” Johnny states with dignity, but he returns Dan’s grin as they pull back into the school lot.

Practice is, as usual, a convenient excuse not to think about anything at all.

“So how about this Friday?” Pat says, tossing his bag into the back of Johnny’s truck and sliding into the front seat. “Kicking off the season against Edmonton Municipal? Talk about a nice, easy start.”

“You wanna let Coach hear that?” Johnny asks sharply, starting the truck and immediately cranking up the heat. It’s only early October, and already he can feel a chill that threatens serious business by Halloween.

Pat snorts. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Another lecture about ‘don’t get too cocky’, blah blah blah. Have I ever let that shit affect my game?”

“Edmonton’s got some good new talent this year,” Johnny perseveres, refusing to take Pat’s bait. “Didn’t you watch the videos Seabs sent us last week? That group of underclassmen they just brought up look like they could do some serious damage.”

“Yeah, I watched them,” Pat says, unconcernedly. “I still think we’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re right,” Johnny says.

Pat glances over at him. “What?”
“What, what?”

“You have that fucking tone,” Pat says, turning in his seat.

“What tone?” Johnny demands. “I fucking hate it when you do this, man. It’s not fair. I’m just talking. This is my voice!”

“That tone like we’re letting you down, somehow,” Pat snaps. “Like I’m letting you down, by not being this perfect specimen of discipline and focus and whatever other inspirational bullshit posters Coach has hanging on his wall. Like I never have the right goddamn answer for you.”

Johnny’s glad that they’re stopped momentarily behind a line of cars at a light.

“Is this about the team,” he asks, pointedly. “Or is this about things between you and me?”

Even though seemingly unable to meet Johnny’s eyes, Pat’s tone is scathing as he says, “Can’t it be both? It’s not my fault you turned down that Consol scholarship to come play for Madison. Stop blaming me, if you think it was such a mistake.”

Johnny stares at him.

“I. What?” He says, stupidly. Traffic starts to move again, and he forces his eyes back to the road. “Mistake? Why would I think turning down the Consol scholarship was a mistake? How do you feel like I’m blaming you?”

“Every time I say the wrong thing, it’s like you’ve been sitting around just waiting for it, and I’m proving you right,” Pat says, words tumbling out of him in a rush, even as his voice is starting to shake. “Like, about college and whatever, the other night. Or not being the kind of teammate you want. I dunno. Not good enough for your standards.”

“When have I—” Johnny cuts himself off, unable to finish the thought. His mind is racing, not sure if he wants to laugh, or start shouting. “Pat, this isn’t fair,” he manages, finally. “I’ve never said any of that shit! I’ve never even thought it. I love playing on a team with you! I want to keep playing on a team with you, after high school, if we can.”

Pat looks like a fish out of water for a moment, mouth opening and closing stupidly without any sound coming out.

“You do?”

“Yes,” Johnny says, through his teeth. He stares at the road over the wheel, gripped with white-knuckled hands. “What the hell have I ever done to make you think I don’t?”

In the passenger seat, Pat draws in on himself, looking stalwartly anywhere but at Johnny.

“I dunno,” he says, and his voice is smaller now, defensive. “The other night at dinner with your mom made me think about stuff, kinda. Like, you’re planning all this stuff, and you have all these, like, expectations, you know? And I’m just, like…” He trails off, shrugging.

“You’re just like what?” Johnny pushes. “Dude, yeah, I have plans and expectations and shit, but isn’t that kind of what we’re supposed to be thinking about right now, big future stuff?”

Pat shrugs again. “I guess.”

He still won’t look over.
“What about us,” Johnny asks. He wants something, anything; any kind of rise he can force out of Pat to prove … what? “I know we haven’t talked about stuff way in the future, but don’t you at least think about it sometimes?”

“Of course I think about it!” Pat snaps. His voice has a familiar, brittle quality. “I fucking love you, you asshole! I’m scared shitless, like, all the fucking time, that you’re gonna finally realize you’re way too good for me, and go off and have your stupid, perfect life. And I’ll just be here, because I have no goddamn idea what I want to do, besides play hockey.”

Dan’s voice echoes through Johnny’s head in the ringing silence that follows. *Maybe you’re starting to outgrow him a little bit?*

The thought makes Johnny flinch.

“I love you, too,” he says, as much to drown it out, as he wants Pat to hear it. To believe it. “I don’t know what else I can say to convince you. I don’t want to just go off and have a stupid, perfect life, whatever that means. I want to be with you, and play with you, and figure stuff out together.”

Pat nods, but he still looks tense and pale when Johnny pulls up at the curb outside his house a few quiet minutes later.

“Need a ride again tomorrow?” Johnny asks, with forced nonchalance. He has to work to keep the sinking sensation out of his expression when Pat shakes his head.

“Nah, but thanks. Dad has some errands to run, so he said he’ll drop me.”

“Okay. See you at lunch, then?”

Pat nods. “See you at lunch.”

He leans over the brake to kiss Johnny goodbye, and that, at least, is familiar. He sighs into it, hand lifting to Johnny’s cheek to press them closer, and Johnny wants to memorize this moment. Every tiny detail: The faded sodium glow of a streetlight catching Pat’s hair the moment before their eyes close, the heat of his body against Johnny’s in the already too-warm truck cab, the way his fingers are cool and dry where they curl against the nape of Johnny’s neck. Johnny craves the familiarity of it.

The way Dan had talked about it, a small, hopeful part of Johnny had thought that maybe if he and Pat actually talked, things would be clearer between them. Now, though, he doesn’t trust this feeling. He doesn’t trust the tightness in his own gut, and the way he still can’t quite shake the image of Pat’s face in his mind as he’d spat the words about Johnny’s stupid, perfect life.

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October: Geno

Consol gets its first win of the season on a road trip against Edmonton Municipal High, and Geno tries not to think too hard about how Edmonton’s stats are even worse than Consol’s so far this season, and about how more than half their team are underclassmen. It’s much easier to focus on Sid practically tackling him to the ice after their line’s second goal, and on the rowdy celebrations with his guys in the locker room after the 5-1 victory.

“Causeway again next week,” Coach reminds them on the bus heading back to campus. “I want to see another performance like tonight. Fleury, keep working on those glove saves, you know their offense likes to come in low and push for rebounds.”

“C’mon, Coach,” Flower groans. “Save it for Monday, huh? We just sent those kids crying to their mamas, you should let us celebrate.”

The guys are getting louder, catcalling a little, and Coach grudgingly rolls his eyes. “Fine,” he says, taking a seat at the front of the bus as it turns onto the highway, “but save some energy for practice this week. You’re gonna need it.”

He turns back around and pointedly ignores the snickering and laughter as Nealer puffs up and waves his arms around dramatically, doing a silent yet eerily accurate impersonation of Coach’s lecturing.

Geno laughs along with the rest of the guys, finally settling back in his seat next to Sid and slipping in his earbuds. He drifts for the rest of the drive back, somewhere between awake and dozing, rolling over plays and strategies in his mind. It’s the first time since the beginning of the season that he feels like he’s standing on solid ground, like the team is actually working together. He clings to the sensation like it might evaporate at any moment with the effervescent fizz of victory that slowly simmers down to a lull as the guys settle in for the ride.

Throughout the following week, the thrill of victory distills into something more akin to renewed desperation.

“Hey,” Geno says, catching up to Flower on their way out of the dressing room after pre-game skate on Friday. “You want to hang out before game?”

Fleury slows up, hoisting his backpack onto one shoulder. “Sure man. But don’t you usually go home before games?”

Geno just shrugs. “Dad away for work, Mom and Denis at restaurant until game. No point in leave and just come back again in a couple hours.”

In truth, the notion of going back to the dark, empty house to try and nap or relax in his usual pre-game routine is only serving to make his nerves even jumpier.

Flower lets them into the residence hall and leads Geno up to his messy single, where they end up sitting amid stacks of schoolbooks and piles of laundry watching the Discovery Channel in mutual silence.

“You coming to the party tonight after the game?” Flower asks, finally, and glancing at the clock.

They’ve got an hour before puck drop, which leaves fifteen minutes to get down to the rink, or face Coach’s wrath.
“Outside party, right?” Geno says. “Heard Nealer say something yesterday.”

“Yup.” Flower rolls off the bed to his feet and stretches, back cracking in roughly seventeen different places. “One of the Mad Tech guys has a cousin or something with all this land a little ways up north by the lake, so it’s gonna be a whole big thing. Guys from like four or five teams, probably.”

Geno says, “Mm,” noncommittally, and Flower shoots him a look on their way out the door.

“C’mon, man. You can fit like six guys in your car at least.”

“See truth now,” Geno says darkly. “Only like me for car.”

“Sorry you had to find out this way, dude,” Flower says, beaming when Geno just makes a face at him.

Sid catches up with them in the atrium, raising a quizzical eyebrow at Geno.

“What’re you doing here?”

“Nothing else to do,” Geno says, grateful when Flower muscles in between them, prodding until Sid shoves him off the walkway.

“Somebody woke up from their nap on the wrong side of bed,” Flower mutters, and Sid huffs.

“I couldn’t sleep,” he says. “It’s only October, so why does it feel so much like playoffs already?”

Flower grumbles in agreement but Geno says, “All in heads. Still early, still just one game.”

Even to his own ears the words sound hollow, and the disparaging looks from both Sid and Flower reinforce his decision not to try and attempt any inspirational speeches in the dressing room.

Once they hit the ice, he can breathe better. He eases up even more after the first couple of shifts where the week’s focused practice is evident in the pressure they put on the Causeway guys around their own net. Geno rings one off the post halfway through the first that’s so close he actually hears the spectators in the stands sigh and groan accordingly.

“Keep ‘em coming, Cap,” Duper calls as he whizzes by after the rebound, and for a few glorious moments, Geno thinks, Yeah. We got this.

That is his first mistake.

The second is handing over the puck to Bergeron off a sloppy backhand pass, right next to Consol’s net. Bergeron jumps on the turnover, threads a seamless pass to his winger through Beau Bennett’s legs, and the next thing Geno sees is Flower’s water bottle bouncing as the puck hits the roof of the net.

After that, it’s like watching a balloon slowly deflate. The shaky confidence they’d been clinging to wavers and buckles, and a couple minutes later Causeway’s huge left winger knocks a gaping hole through Tanger and Despres for his centerman to zip through. Just like that Consol is down two.

“Ugh,” mutters Sid on the bench next to Geno, glowering as the scoring Causeway center happily scales his teammate like a tree in celebration.

“Ugh,” Geno echoes. His nerves are back tenfold, accompanied now with an undercurrent of anger and frustration. He can feel it reflected on both sides down the bench, everyone shifting restlessly and leaning up toward the boards to watch.
And there are chances. Lots of them.

Geno follows his post-ringer with a couple more attempts that go just wide, slapping the puck so hard he can still feel the reverberations in his palm as he skates back over to the bench for a change. Sid skids in for a wraparound that somehow bounces off the Causeway goalie’s skate behind him as he lunges forward, sliding just shy of the goal mouth as one of the defensemen jumps in to collect it and sweep it out. Glasser gets flattened in the paint trying desperately to jam the puck in through a scrum.

“How the fuck are there still two more periods,” Despres groans, and next to him on the bench Beau looks momentarily anxious, like he wants to agree but is afraid of what might happen if he does.

“How’re you holding up, kid?” Glasser asks him, but Beau just shrugs, chewing on his bottom lip. Glass pats him on the shoulder and goes back to studiously picking at a hangnail.

“Only two down,” Geno tries, but gets only some noncommittal grumbling in return. “Just need to keep pushing chances.”

They do. To the point where Neal gets called for goalie interference and has to be escorted screaming to the box by two disgruntled looking refs, the goal he’d finally managed to stuff in five-hole disallowed after only a few seconds’ deliberation. They tack on an extra two minutes for unsportsmanlike conduct.

Twenty seconds into the penalty kill, Letang follows Neal for a dirty hit to Bergeron that sends him sprawling, and Causeway capitalizes about five seconds into the two-man advantage to make it three-nothing. They look gleeful.

Geno’s feet feel like dead weight, his legs screaming at him as he chases the puck down the boards, trying desperately to hold it in. This isn’t him, this isn’t his team.

Possibly the most frustrating part of all this is how, deep down, Geno objectively knows that the vast majority of this is all in his head. There’s nothing new here, nothing suddenly superhuman about the Causeway guys that should be so utterly insurmountable as the situation feels.

The puck finds his tape through a scrum and he lunges for a lane that opens miraculously to his left, thinking yes, YES as he winds up for it, just before blunt force slams his shoulder and he goes down in a tangle of arms and legs and skates and sticks. He isn’t even a little surprised when he looks up to see Bergeron panting above him, already back to one knee and looking winded but criminally self-satisfied.

The end of period buzzer sounds, echoing the tinny ringing in Geno’s ears. Bergeron finishes picking himself up, brushing the snow off his knees and grinning down.

“We spend so much time dancing together,” he laughs. His accent is nothing as heavy as Flower’s, but there’s still a familiar cadence rolling through the consonants. “You should probably take me out for coffee before next period if we’re gonna keep this up.”

It’s stupid, friendly chirping. It’s meaningless. Geno knows should just ignore it, which is why he’s so surprised to find himself suddenly on his feet, completely unaware of even getting there, gloves on the ice and sinking his bare fist into Bergeron’s stomach.

Bergeron lets out a surprised Whuh sound, the wind rushing from his lungs as he staggers back, but he’s winding up before he even regains footing and throwing one right back with his full weight behind it. Geno’s chest protector takes most of the abuse, and he uses his momentary leverage to
grab Bergeron’s sweater and take them both right back down to the ice.

He kneels over Bergeron, not even feeling the scrabbling hands and fists aiming for purchase around Geno’s midsection, just wanting to -- to what. He doesn’t know. Geno isn’t violent or explosive, he’s not like some of the guys he’s played with over the years who let something get under their skin and won’t stop until they see blood on the ice. All he knows is that stupid look on Bergeron’s narrow, haughty face, and how if he can just rearrange it into something a little less smug, then maybe he can go into the third with a sense of accomplishment.

There are arms around his middle suddenly, two refs finally managing to pull them apart, and Geno doesn’t even really hear what they’re shouting. He’s halfway to the penalty box before he remembers -- oh right, the period ended, and he turns to find his whole team standing clustered and staring. Actually, both teams, as Causeway’s waiting ranks open up to absorb Bergeron and filter back down the hall to the guest dressing rooms.

There’s a red smear over Bergeron’s arm, and it’s only when Geno looks down in surprise that he notices a harsh split across the knuckles of his left hand. As soon as he sees it, it starts to sting.

Nobody says anything as they collect back in the dressing room, until Coach follows them in.

“What the hell was that?” he demands, storming up to stand in front of where Geno’s sitting, digging around in his gear bag one-handed for a towel to wipe his knuckles off with.

“Don’t know,” Geno mumbles, without looking at him. He can feel the eyes of his team on him from all sides, and he just keeps staring at the Bauer logo on the hem of his shorts. “Was stupid.”

Coach snorts. “No shit. If I see you -- or anybody --” he turns, speaking to the room at large, “pull something like that again, I’ll staple your goddamn sweater to the bench until graduation. I don’t care how many goals you can score.”

“Yes, Coach,” Geno says, still not looking up.

“Penalty kill, keep your heads up,” Coach adds. “We’ve got an instigator penalty coming to start the third, and we don’t need to do them any more favors.”

Geno can feel Bergeron watching him warily as they take their seats in the penalty boxes to start the period, but can’t bring himself to look over. He serves out the five for fighting, plus two-minute instigator penalty watching play continue through the smudged panes of plexiglas.

His guys kill off the penalty and manage to hold steady through the final minutes, but their offense is as flat and lifeless as Geno feels. He and Sid play their last few shifts together, generating a couple of chances here and there, but mostly just getting pushed back into their own end and jostled around the net.

Bergeron is still tailing him, but he’s fallen back and seems to be taking his chances just running interference with the rest of his line. He doesn’t even seem bent on revenge, or anything so petty as the larger of his two linemates, some rangy underclassman with a lot of teeth that he bares as he blocks Geno roughly against the boards, sending the puck skittering free for the Causeway defensemen to collect.

“First shutout against,” says Beau, bleakly, sinking down on the dressing room bench a few minutes later and halfheartedly tugging at a skate lace.

“And last,” Sid says loudly. His face has gone a blotchy red that has nothing to do with exertion, and he fidgets around the room, still unwilling to take a seat. “We’re better than that, and we need to get
our shit together so next time we can teach those cocky assholes a lesson.”

It’s not a pep talk. It’s not meant to be inspirational. Sid sounds like a tired, hungry kid after a long day in a department store, petulant and sulky, but Geno can’t think of a thing to even begin mitigating this tantrum. Luckily, Flower steps in before he has to.

“We could all sit around here and feel sorry for ourselves,” he says, “or we could go drink those Madison idiots’ beer and fuck some shit up.”

Which is how Geno finds himself chauffeuring a car full of teammates forty five minutes to a chilly field in the middle of nowhere, trying to ignore the aches and twinges he always seems to notice more after a loss and to concentrate on something -- anything -- other than the dull throbbing of his bloodied knuckles.
The party is already well underway by the time Patrice pulls up in his mom’s station wagon. He parks at the edge of a field up hemmed in by a dense treeline, rising dark and ominous against the bluish-black of a moonless night sky.

“Hey, did you hear who won the Madison-Glendale game?” Marchy asks, digging around under the front passenger seat for the mostly-full bottle of Jim Beam he’s got stashed there.

“Nope,” Patrice says, at the same time as Segs asks, “Do we care?”

“We care,” says Marchy, getting out of the car and stretching so his back cracks, “because we want to know who’s gonna be the most pissed when we drink their beer and steal their ladies.”

“Right,” says Patrice.

“Good point,” says Segs.

“I am very wise,” says Marchy. ”Someday you boys will realize this.” He takes a long swig from the bottle, throws up his arms, and yells, “Fuck yeah, baby! Who’s ready to get krunk?”

He takes off down the row of cars towards sounds of pumping bass and an eerie glow of floodlights, Patrice and Segs following along in his wake.

“Ugh,” Segs says, looking at the bumper stickers on an SUV they pass, “Consol’s gotta be here, too?”

In the dim light, Patrice can just barely make out the Consol Preparatory Academy Hockey decal. He says, “Yeah, looks that way.”

Segs’ eyes narrow and the corners of his mouth curl up in a wicked little smirk. “Hey, we never got to pay that big fucker back for knocking you around out there,” he says. “Wonder if he’s gonna show.”

“Don’t,” Patrice says, warningly. “Don’t you fucking dare, dude. Coach was pissed enough at me for throwing down, what do you think he’d do with you if he found out you were taking it off the ice?”

Segs visibly falters, meeting Patrice’s eyes before jutting his chin out defiantly. “Fuck off, Bergeron,” he grumbles, starting to walk again and jostling their elbows together. “Fun-ruiner.”

Patrice jostles back, smiling a little. “Wouldn’t be so fun if you got kicked off top line with us,” he says reasonably. “Or suspended from the team. I’m just watching your back, kid.”

Segs makes a face and Patrice sticks out his tongue, grinning. It’s much easier, anyway, to ignore the steady throbbing of his ribs where they’d already begun to mottle in the shower, and the anxious guilt that goes with it.

“You guys wanna hurry the fuck up?” Marchy calls back to them, and Patrice jogs to catch up, swiping the bottle still held loosely in Marchy’s hand and taking a long swig. It burns and he gags a little on the sickly-sweet aftertaste, but chases the first gulp with another. Marchy laughs. “You doing okay there, buddy?”
“Uh-huh,” Patrice says, cradling the bottle out of reach when Marchy tries to grab for it again. “Yeah, man. We fucking won!”

“Damn right,” says Segs, loud enough for a cluster of girls in Madison Tech colors to hear. They don’t look terribly amused, though, casting him morose glances before returning to their collection of red Solo cups. Segs winces. “Whoops. Guess we know who else lost tonight.”

Sure enough, the other Madison kids Patrice notices interspersed throughout the crowd all look decidedly downtrodden. He glances around looking for Johnny, but isn’t terribly surprised when he doesn’t see him. Johnny’s agenda after losses tends to be a lot of sitting alone in dark corners, systematically blaming himself for everything that went wrong, but since Patrice doesn’t see Patrick, either, it’s safe to assume that’s being handled.

“Finally,” says Looch, looming out of the dark behind a small herd of foldout tables covered in cheap booze. He’s got an arm around Krejci, cup in hand, and who seems to be using Looch to keep himself upright. “We were beginning to think you guys got lost. Where’s everyone else?”

“Thorty and Paillsy and whoever else was riding with them stopped off for food, I think,” says Marchy. He grabs a cup from a nearby stack and starts inspecting bottles with Segs’ help. “Dunno about anybody else. I think Khu said him and Tuukks were just gonna head home.”

“Ugh. Boo,” groans Krejci, flopping his head on Looch’s shoulder and letting his cup tilt dangerously. “He should let Tuukks out to play sometimes, otherwise the kid’s gonna get bored and go home to Finland and then where’ll we be?”

“We’ll be here,” Looch says. “And he’ll be in Finland.”

Davy pokes him hard in the side. “Hey, whatever, smartass. Who wants to do some shots and talk about how fucking great me and Looch’s goal was?”

Looch beams, ducking his head and tightening his arm around Krejci’s waist, ignoring Segs’ revolted mutter of, “Codependent much?”

By the time they’ve put a significant dent in the Jim Beam and chased it down with a couple Jägerbombs, Patrice can’t feel the throbbing in his ribs anymore. In fact, he can’t feel much of anything, beyond the pleasant, floating sensation in all of his extremities, like bobbing in a swimming pool.

Thorty shows up eventually with Paillsy in tow, and a bag of Taco Bell, and Patrice is loose enough even to lean into the hesitant one-armed hug Paillsy squeezes around his shoulders. He’s humming like a powerline, jittering, probably from the Red Bull in the Jägerbombs on top of the adrenaline.

He’s not sure if it’s a few minutes or a couple hours later, all of them still clustered around in the vicinity of the tables, out of the direct glare of the floodlights, but suddenly Johnny is there, seeming to appear out of nowhere and tugging at the arm of Patrice’s hoodie.

“Hey!” Patrice cries, cutting Segs off mid-sentence in whatever story he’s telling. “Hey, Johnny Toews! You know my guys, right?”

There’s an awkward moment where Segs, Marchy, Looch, Krejci, Thorty, and Paillsy all stare at Johnny and he stares flatly back, before Thorty holds out a fist to bump and Johnny returns the gesture stiffly.

“Yeah, uh,” he says. “Hey. Don’t mind me, I just had a question for Bergy real quick.”
Segs immediately re-launches into whatever he’d been saying before the interruption, and Patrice gets unsteadily off his folding chair to follow Johnny. “What’s up, man? Sorry about the loss tonight.”

Johnny makes a noise in his throat that might be dismissive, if it didn’t sound so choked. “Whatever,” he mutters. “It was our fault for losing that two-goal lead in the third. I just wanted to ask if you’d seen Pat around anywhere.”

“I figured he’d be with you,” Patrice says, wading through the pea soup of his drunken memory and trying to remember if he’d seen Kane wandering around. “No, I don’t think I’ve seen him. Everything okay?”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, but his face is tight and unreadable in a way that Patrice has grown to equate with nothing good. “But he caught a ride with some of the other guys after the game, and they haven’t seen him since a few minutes after they got here, either.”

Distantly it occurs to Patrice to ask why Pat and Johnny hadn’t driven over together, which seems a strange enough event in and of itself, but before he can, Johnny says, “It’s fine, man. Just tell him to text me if you see him, ‘kay? And hey, congrats on the win.”

“Thanks,” Patrice says, caught off his guard by the abruptness. “Uh. Sure, yeah, I’ll tell him.”

“Appreciate it,” Johnny says. “See you around.”

Patrice replies, “Uh-huh,” but Johnny’s already turned and headed off back toward the main knot of people, where someone’s got a bonfire started. It looks warm and inviting, but also loud and chaotic, with what appears to be a group of Mad Tech guys trying to light sticks on fire and waving them around like sparklers.

“Hey,” he says, tapping Looch on the shoulder once he makes it back to their little circle of chairs. “I’ll be right back, I wanna go grab my coat from the car.”

Looch eyes him dubiously. “You want a hand getting out there?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine,” Patrice says, even as he sways a little and has to catch himself on the back of Looch’s chair. “Besides, you’ve got Davy,” he flaps a hand in the direction of Krejci, sprawled awkwardly across his own chair and Looch’s lap.

“Yeah,” Looch agrees, hesitantly. “Promise you won’t try to drive?”

“Dude,” says Patrice, “you know I don’t do that shit.”

“Just looking out,” Looch says, with a disarming smile, and Patrice snorts a laugh.

“Thanks, Dad. You sure you’re only sixteen?”

Looch smirks. “Last I checked.”

Patrice starts off toward the rows of cars, tripping and stumbling on wobbly legs through the long grass and dry, pitted mud underneath. He tries not to think about snakes. Or large, biting insects. Or maybe cow pies. He’s concentrating so hard on where he’s walking that he almost doesn’t see the silhouetted figure perched on the trunk of an old-model Camry until they’re practically on top of each other.

“Shit!” Patrice yelps. “You scared the fuck out of me.” Then he sees who it is. “Oh. It’s you.”
“Me,” says Malkin, but he sounds more sullen than anything. The split lip Patrice had managed to give him shows up like a dark smudge, and the whites of his eyes glint dully in the gloom as they flick over Patrice. He slides off the car and sways a little, catching himself unsteadily on the bumper.

Patrice waffles a moment, not really sure how to proceed in the awkward silence stretching between them, so he just mutters, “Sorry ‘bout your lip.”

Malkin just looks at him for a long moment. “Fuck off, Bergeron,” he says, followed by a few words of mumbled Russian that Patrice can’t understand, though the tone is pretty clear.

“Excuse me?” Patrice snaps. He takes a couple of steps toward Malkin, meeting his glare even as he has to tilt his chin up dramatically to do it. “What’s your problem, man? The game’s over.”

“Whatever,” Malkin says, a tangled jumble of syllables that grate like sandpaper over the fraying ends of Patrice’s patience. He snorts, looking down his excessive amount of nose at Patrice with an expression somewhere between disgust and disbelief. Patrice feels about three inches tall. He hesitates, furrows his brows, and finally adds, “Not worth trouble.”

Patrice shoves him, hard. He just wants to get by, get around, get away, something like that, but winds up giving it the force of a cross-check.

Malkin responds so fast, Patrice isn’t sure which of them is more surprised. Before he can blink, Malkin’s got his wrist caught in an iron grip, slamming Patrice back into the rear of his car so Patrice’s knees buckle and he overbalances, dragging Malkin with him.

He sees Malkin’s face, eyes wide like he’s still catching up to his own body, falling forward so they’re nose to nose with Patrice trapped against the awkward angles of metal and plastic, cold enough that he can feel it through his jeans. He counts one breath, two, harsh and loud and ragged in the narrow space between their bodies, and for an open field, the night feels suddenly claustrophobic.

The drunken buzz in Patrice’s ears thrums and wavers, and for just a split second he teeters on the brink of his own reasoning before the scale tips, the tether snaps, and he’s hauling off and punching Malkin.

It’s really satisfying.

Patrice isn’t a very physical guy on the ice, never has been, but there’s something about the sturdy, aching thud of his fist connecting with Malkin’s nose that sparks something deeply gratifying in a part of himself he didn’t know he had. He’s almost grateful for the retaliatory shock of knuckles grazing his cheekbone, the excuse to swing back and try again, using the leverage afforded where he’s leaned up against the car to push off, send them both sprawling onto the hard-packed uneven ground.

Malkin’s swearing, snarling some disjointed jumble of English and Russian that Patrice ignores, focusing instead on how he’s suddenly pinned on his back with Malkin’s long legs boxing him in on either side. Neither of them are sober or coordinated enough to do much more than scrabble at each other, Patrice straining up to try and aim another punch at Malkin’s face, while Malkin tries to dodge and simultaneously aim his own blows to any part of Patrice he can reach.

Patrice is flat on his back and out of breath, air trapped in his chest as Malkin uses his leverage on top to punch and kick and scrape. Patrice bucks up, desperately trying to gain back some breathing room, fitting his fingers underneath Malkin’s thick sweater and sinking his nails down against the soft, exposed skin.
“Fuck,” Malkin says when Patrice pinches, taking another swing at Patrice’s face.

There’s no one to stop them, no ref to blow the whistle or teammates to yank them apart. Patrice gets Malkin in the nose, Malkin’s knee digging painfully into Patrice’s already tender ribs. He can taste blood in his mouth.

“Fuck you,” Patrice spits back, and Malkin shifts again, keeping him pinned as his nose peppers the front of Patrice’s hoodie with blood. They glare at each other, paused by some mutual, unspoken accord with chests heaving, Patrice’s fists still clutched tight, held awkwardly at his sides.

He bucks up again, twisting until Malkin seems to come back to his body, giving Patrice another rough little shove before rolling off and getting slowly to his feet. Patrice follows suit stiffly, the pleasant haze of alcohol ebbing away enough to remind him with a shameful jolt that this isn’t even his first fight of the evening.

Malkin seems about as surprised as Patrice feels, nose still dripping and lip even puffier than before, and Patrice can only imagine what his own face looks like. The cheek Malkin’s fist had connected with already feels heavy and hot, and there’s still a tinny taste on his tongue.

As his face throbs, Patrice’s fists clench again, itching to just launch right back at Malkin, to finish this on his terms. Glancing up, he can see that this is exactly what Malkin expects, too, his eyes narrowing and his jaw set.

The air between them hangs heavy for a long moment, the pulse hammering in Patrice’s ears echoing the distant bass pump of the party music. Malkin’s eyes are black as the treeline behind him, as the blood still seeping from his nose.

Patrice says, “I’m fucking done with this bullshit.”

He turns, half expecting, half hoping, that Malkin will attack again; give him an excuse to ignore the persistent thoughts all nagging in a jumbled chorus of Coach’s and his parents’ voices. Malkin doesn’t, though. He offers only a snort of disgust, chuh, in his throat, that Patrice wills himself not to acknowledge, to just keep walking away from until he’s back in the eerily bright floodlit party grounds.

“Dude, you were gone forever,” Marchy slurs at him, as soon as he’s picked his way back over to their little corner on the outskirts of the mayhem. “Where’s your — oh my god.” His eyes go comically huge, mouth making a cartoon “o” shape as he points. “What the fuck happened to your face?”

Patrice flinches, hand going up instinctively to his cheek. Even the light brush of his own fingertips makes it throb harder, probably not aided by the embarrassed flush making the heated skin prickle. “Um.” He hadn’t even thought this far ahead, only wanting to get away from Malkin as fast as he could. “I… ran into Malkin,” he finishes lamely.

“What?” Segs explodes, staring wide-eyed over Marchy’s shoulder. “Are you fucking kidding me? Here? Again?”

He sways a little on his feet, beer can loose in one hand as he reaches out with the other to touch Patrice’s face. Patrice flinches, trying to stay out of reach even as Looch cranes around in his seat where Krejci now looks completely unconscious across his lap, and Thorty and Paillsy stop talking and look over in alarm.

“Woah,” says Thorty.
“What the fuck,” says Paillsy, and Patrice can’t miss the distantly familiar protective edge to his angry tone. Something in Patrice’s chest tightens even further.

“It’s not that big a deal,” he mumbles, or tries to, but Marchy cuts him off with an incredulous snort.

“Dude, your face is like five different colors,” he says, sounding disgusted. “Your eye is all swollen, and your lip is bleeding. That douchebag goes to Consol, I’m pretty sure he can afford a fucking punching bag. You don’t have to volunteer.”

Patrice glares at him. “I think I might’ve broken his nose,” he says defensively, but only feels more sick when Segs gives a loud, approving whoop.

“How did this even start, anyway?” Looch asks.

“It, um.” Patrice stops and has to wrack his brain, trying to remember. “I dunno,” he finally says, feeling stupid even as Looch keeps watching him with that level, unreadable stare. “I guess we were just still pissed from earlier. I ran into him on my way to the car, and he was mouthing off, so…” He shrugs.

Maybe that’s a bit of an embellishment, but whatever. The more honest mostly I just wanted to punch that stupid look off his stupid face doesn’t seem strictly necessary at this point.

Segs is still snarling around the lip of his can, phrases like, “Stuck-up rich motherfucker,” and, “Can’t wait until he runs into me,” occasionally audible.

“Don’t you dare,” Patrice warns him, glaring. “Dude, don’t get involved in this. It’s over, anyway. Just forget it, okay?”

Segs looks sullen, but after a long moment, he nods.

“I’m serious,” Patrice says, looking around at all of them, eyes lingering over Marchy, who tries and fails to look innocent. “Nobody do anything stupid. This is already bad enough, and I’m already going to be dealing with” -- oh, god -- “the fallout from Coach on Monday. Can we please just forget about it?”

“Whatever you say, Cap,” says Thorty, although his expression remains dark, still looking over Patrice’s face.

Paillsy adds, “Yeah, fine, but if he starts shit on the ice again—”

“Then we’re just going to let the refs deal with it,” Patrice cuts him off loudly, glaring. Maybe it should be sweet, or chivalrous or whatever, but mostly Paillsy’s residual protective streak is starting to chafe Patrice’s nerves.

Finally, Looch says, “You want another beer, man?”

Patrice’s buzz has long since worn off, to be replaced with a dull ache around his temples.

“Sure,” he says, “what do we have left?”

He nurses the beer slowly, so he’s sober enough to drive home when the time comes. He goes to bed in the early hours of the morning with a bag of frozen peas wrapped in a towel and pressed to his face that only slightly dulls the ache. Worse, though, is the tension in his gut thinking about how he’s going to face his parents later, and then Coach on Monday; their disappointed faces the last thing on his mind before he finally sinks into exhausted sleep.
October: Johnny

Johnny feels sick after the loss. Or maybe he’s felt sick all day; he can’t really put his finger on where the lines are drawn between the fight with Pat, anxiety leading up to the game, and then that gut-punch feeling accompanying the final buzzer on a 3-2 loss.

He’d left his truck in the school lot, piling into Danny’s car with Crow and Ray. The ride up to Leddy’s cousin’s lake property was quiet, although it was hard to really invest in moping while Danny led them all on an instructional tour of his late-nineties obscure punk collection.

Johnny didn’t even really want to come. Pat was still being weird, breaking away with a group of guys including Saad and Pirri as they all organized themselves to drive up. He met Johnny’s gaze in the midst of the milling clusters of guys, and something softened around his eyes for just a moment before Saader called, “Yo, Kaner, you coming with?”

“Yeah,” Pat called over his shoulder, throwing Johnny the ghost of an apologetic grimace before turning and following.

Whatever he’d said as Johnny had dropped him off the night before, even with that kiss goodbye, the ground is still unsteady between them. Johnny has no idea what to do or say to fix it. If he’s honest, he still isn’t even entirely sure he has a clear idea of what went so wrong in the first place.

So he gets in Danny’s car when Danny calls for him, and climbs into the cramped back seat with Ray, who looks almost as miserable as Johnny feels.

“Dude, that wasn’t your fault,” Johnny says quietly, as Danny and Crow bicker over the stereo.

Ray just shrugs. “Doesn’t feel that way.”

Johnny doesn’t know what else to say, not trusting himself to believe in any cliched comforting bullshit enough to make it worthwhile, so he just leans over and bumps their shoulders together.

“Why aren’t you with your boy?” Ray asks, after a moment. Crow and Danny have stopped arguing, though, and Johnny doesn’t miss the way Danny’s eyes dart up in the rearview mirror.

“Riding with Saader, I think,” Johnny says, in a forced casual tone. He looks out the window, avoiding Danny’s look.

Crow laughs. “That’s fucking brave of him. That little shit said he passed his test last week, but I’m pretty sure he found his license in the bottom of a Cracker Jack box. He ran like three stop signs just driving us to Taco Bell.”

Johnny tries to smile, but something seems to be wrong with his face.

“Aw, cheer up, Cap,” Ray says, elbowing him. “Crow’s just being dramatic. I’m sure it was more like two stop signs.”

He grins when Johnny elbows him back, and the rest of the ride is easier after that, the other three bickering amiably as Johnny nods along.

Johnny has never understood how other guys can just let bad games go so quickly. There have been games they’ve won, even, by luck, or clutch play, by the skin of their teeth, that he hasn’t felt comfortable letting go of until they’ve played again. Until he’s had a chance to recalibrate and adjust
and right a few wrongs. Going down after a two-goal lead leaves a bitter taste in his mouth and a heaviness in his limbs he knows he won’t shake before they spend a few hours back out on the ice.

He just wants something to feel right in the interim, though, which is why, after a painfully dragging hour spent watching the other guys do shots and horse around by the bonfire, Johnny makes up his mind to go looking for Pat. At least there’s got to be something to do about the heaviness still seated in his chest.

The problem is finding Pat.

Breaking away from the group, Johnny quickly becomes disoriented in the crowd. He guesses there have to be nearly a hundred people here, if not more; guys from half a dozen schools at least, filtering in after wins and losses with spectators, friends, and classmates in tow.

Every single one of them, it seems, is some degree of shithammered, including Patrice, who Johnny is momentarily relieved to wander past in a group of his guys. For a moment, Johnny entertains the idea of just hunkering down with them, even under the semi-hostile glances of Patrice’s teammates, but he moves on.

He ends up gravitating through the main crowd, under the harsh spotlights hooked up to a generator, the noise of which is only partially drowned out by a big set of speakers blasting Green Day. There, finally, on the outskirts of the light nearest the edge of the lake, he sees the familiar blond head.

Pat still has Saader and Pirri with him, perched on coolers in a group of people Johnny vaguely recognizes from school. He looks tired but happy, drink in hand, laughing as the girl next to him leans close to say something over the music. Johnny supposes she’s cute, with red hair falling past her shoulders and a pale, heart-shaped face. He wouldn’t notice, except for how Pat is clearly noticing, too, eyes bright and smile teasing in a way that Johnny is all too familiar with.

It’s Pat, he reminds himself. It’s just Pat being Pat.

But something in Johnny hesitates, hangs back when the rest of him is pushing to just move. Go over there, haul Pat off somewhere quiet where they can talk, and put this weirdness to rest so they can just be them again.

Pat gets up off his cooler, rummaging around inside it and coming out with two fresh beers before resuming his seat. He hands one to the redhead, who beams.

Johnny is aware of standing around watching like a complete creep, as people mill around him and the music thuds on in the background. He wishes Pat would look up and see him. It would be so easy, and then he would get up and come over to Johnny, and save him the trouble of having to insert himself awkwardly into this comfortable little scene.

Of course Pat doesn’t look up. He’s much too interested in talking to the girl, apparently, even as Saad and Pirri wander away with the rest of the group toward the lake shore.

Johnny feels like he’s aware of the next few moments before they even happen. Like he’s watching the scene on replay from somewhere much further away than he is, so none of it actually feels very surprising.

Pat leaning in, saying something that makes Redhead laugh, and her response of leaning forward to close the already narrow space between them to brush their lips together.

It’s barely a kiss. Johnny has had some kisses. This is barely anything at all.
She jerks away, clearly apologetic, embarrassed, shoulders drawn in and head ducking so her hair covers her face. Pat hesitates for a moment, looking shellshocked; more surprised than Johnny feels. Johnny can see the dark flush in his cheeks from yards away, even in bad lighting.

And then he sees Pat move, curling a hand around her wrist and pulling her back in. He says something, Johnny sees his lips move, and then she’s shifting closer on the cooler beside him, and this time it’s Pat who leans in.

Johnny watches, still feeling so far removed that it’s only when a group of guys in Consol jackets run by and nearly knock him over that he finally seems to grasp that this is real. This is happening, watching his boyfriend make out with some girl in plain fucking sight of a few dozen people. And even so, the part of him that would usually be livid, or hurt, or something, anything, only echoes hollowly, numbly. His feet seem unwilling to move.

A moment later, though, she sits back. She still looks apologetic, though for what Johnny has no idea. Pat is the one who should be apologizing, freaking out, jerking away in panic and maybe telling her, oh right, yeah, he’s got a boyfriend.

Johnny tears himself away. Even in his numb state, he doesn’t want to see how this scene ends.

He doesn’t remember getting back to Danny and the other Madison guys. Trying to piece it together later, he’s got no idea how he manages to navigate back through the crowded chaos and find them, but he does. Crow shoves a beer into his hand, and Johnny takes refuge behind it, nursing it in silence and feeling like an outsider, an imposter among all this happy chaos.

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David calls absurdly early the next morning, while Johnny is still pretending to be asleep. Like maybe if he lies still long enough, the world will reset itself in daylight, and the sick weight he woke up with in the pit of his stomach will lighten.

“It’s like, almost eight-thirty, dude,” David says, in response to Johnny’s groggy greeting. “It’s not that early. Don’t you have that kids’ soccer thing today?”

“Nope.” Johnny shuts his eyes again and scrunches down further under the covers. “We’re on break until winter session starts in November.”

“Uh-huh.” David doesn’t sound like he’s really listening. “Hey, is Mom there?”

Johnny groans. “Why don’t you hang up and try calling her phone and you can find out?”

“I already did,” David says. “She didn’t pick up, duh, that’s why I called you.”

“Duh,” mimics Johnny. “Well then I don’t know. Maybe she’s still asleep, too.”

“Oh yeah right, Mom in bed after seven like, ever.” David brushes him off with a flippant snort. “Fine, whatever, then can you come get me in like an hour? I have to do this diorama thing for European History so I need to go to the mall for supplies.”

So far, Johnny’s plans for the day involve lying around wallowing in misery, with a possible break later on for some pushups.

“Sure,” he says at last, and David gives a little whoop of victory. “Yeah, I’ll be there in like, an hour and a half. I gotta shower and find clothes and stuff.”
"Awesome," says David. “You know where the visitor’s lot is, over behind the rec center and rink and stuff, right? Just park in there and text me, I’ll come right down."

Johnny sits a moment after they’ve hung up, fingers still curled around his phone and staring at the dark screen. He wants to call Pat, a reflex he has to consciously force himself to suppress. Rage and hurt wash through him like a tide with every breath, leaving a disjointed flotsam of panic and nausea in their wake.

He leaves the phone on his nightstand and goes to shower.

They end up at the shopping center closest to Consol that shares its parking lot with a tire outlet and Dollar Tree, which David immediately makes a beeline for. He hums to himself, bouncing on his toes a little as he throws pipe cleaners and straws and some multicolored sequin-y things into his basket while Johnny trails along behind, willing himself not to check his phone every ten seconds.

“So what is this for again?” he asks finally, more to distract himself than anything.

David leans over a display to inspect some badly assembled fake plants. “Oh, it’s this thing for Euro History where we have to design a room in the style of some famous palace or church or something. I got Versailles, so I have to make some fancy French furniture and stuff.”

“Cool,” says Johnny, watching David give up on the plants and toss a couple of rolls of tinfoil into his basket.

“Yeah,” David shrugs. “It’s actually pretty neat. Better than writing a paper or something I guess, right?”

“I dunno,” Johnny says, eyeing the basket of assorted crafty things dubiously. “I think I’d do better with an essay. But hey, you must be into it, if you’re actually starting your homework this early on a Saturday for once.” He elbows David in the arm with a teasing smirk.

David looks sheepish. “Um, actually we got the assignment like, two weeks ago. It’s due on Monday. Hey!” He aims a kick at Johnny’s shoe, as Johnny rolls his eyes and casts him a pointed look. “I’m getting it done, aren’t I? You’d better not go rat me out to Mom and Dad, asshole.”

“Fuck off,” Johnny says. “When have I done anything like that?”

David casts him a level, pointed look. “You’re kidding, right? You lived for ratting me out when we went to the same school.”

Johnny bristles, glaring, and David meets his gaze evenly. It’s not any different from a thousand other confrontations before it, but Johnny suddenly finds himself without a comeback, without anything but a festering, explosive anger. He takes a deep breath that rattles in his throat and says, as calmly as he can, “When you’re done, I’ll be in the car.”

Without waiting for an answer, he turns and stomps off for the exit, with David’s startled expression burned into his brain like the afterimage of a flashbulb.

David follows some five minutes later, sliding into the passenger seat and dropping the plastic shopping bag between his feet without a word. He pulls on his seatbelt and stares straight ahead.

“I was a dick,” Johnny says, not looking at him.

“Yeah,” David agrees.
“So were you,” Johnny adds, looking up. “But it’s fine. Don’t worry, I’m not gonna say shit to Mom and Dad.”

David nods, and he’s quiet for another few seconds before asking, “So you wanna talk about whatever crawled up your ass, bro? It wasn’t that bad a loss and you don’t usually start pulling out this kind of crazy for at least another couple months into the season.”

“I’m not—” Johnny snaps, but he can’t figure out a good way to end the statement, so it just hangs there between them while David gives him an infuriatingly knowing look.

“Dude, you’re going to give yourself a coronary before you reach adulthood. I know you’re probably gonna punch me, but it’s not that big a deal, you know? One loss early in the season?”

Johnny opens his mouth, and then shuts it again.

“Pat cheated on me,” he blurs, and then chokes a little on the words. “I saw him last night at a party, making out with some girl from school.”

David stares. “You’re full of shit.”

“Yeah,” Johnny mumbles, looking down at his lap and concentrating on a little bruise over one of his knuckles. “This is really something I love joking about.”

David’s quiet for so long that Johnny nearly caves and glances back up, but finally he says, “That isn’t what I meant at all.”

“I know,” says Johnny miserably.

“He’s a piece of shit,” David says, so vehemently that this time Johnny does look up, meeting his brother’s eyes and trying not to let the blazing anger there feel as comforting as it does. David’s always been the sweeter, more laid back one; never had the kind of trouble Johnny does keeping his temper in check, but right now he thinks he can see a little what the guys are talking about when they tell him he can be kind of intense in the locker room, if it’s anything like this.

“He’s not,” Johnny starts, instantly grateful when David steamrolls right over him.

“He is, dude, if he’s going around doing shit like that. Do you think they’ve been—”

“I don’t know,” Johnny says quickly, not wanting to even acknowledge the end of that sentence. “I mean, no? Probably not? He’s the worst fucking liar ever. He couldn’t even keep my birthday party a secret last Spring.” He’s had a lot of time to think about this over the last eighteen hours. “I just … I think he was just pissed.”

“He’s not,” Johnny starts, instantly grateful when David steamrolls right over him.

“Pissed.”

“Yeah, pissed,” says Johnny, and now he can feel the angry spark kindling in his belly, quickly overtaking the hurt and despair. “We had this stupid fight, I don’t even remember what about, but it was stupid, okay. There’s all this shit going on with college and what we’re doing after high school and I think I kinda freaked him out.”

“Pissed.”

“Yeah, pissed,” says Johnny, and now he can feel the angry spark kindling in his belly, quickly overtaking the hurt and despair. “We had this stupid fight, I don’t even remember what about, but it was stupid, okay. There’s all this shit going on with college and what we’re doing after high school and I think I kinda freaked him out.”

“So,” says David slowly, “really what you mean is that your boyfriend, the guy you’ve been stupid for since pretty much forever and have been planning your whole dumb life around -- it’s somehow your fault that he cheated on you.”

“That is not what I said,” Johnny says icily, and David snorts.
“No, but you’re making excuses for him.”

Johnny glares. “This isn’t why I told you.”

“How did you tell me?” David fires back. “So I’d, what, threaten to beat him up or some dumb crap like that? We both know you can fight your own battles better than I could do it for you.”

“No, but I thought maybe you’d be on my fucking side,” Johnny nearly shouts. The keys are clutched in his hand still, the parked car growing warmer under the midday sun. The back of his neck prickles uncomfortably.

“Dude, I am on your side,” says David, eyes going big and earnest and anger ebbing back almost as quickly as it came. “But I think, like, between the two of us in this car? I’m the only one.”

Another silence stretches between them as Johnny toys with the keys and David fidgets with a hangnail. Finally, Johnny says, “Can we let this drop for now?”

“Sure,” says David.

“I just. Shit’s fucked up and I don’t want to make it worse by guessing, you know? I’d rather figure it out and then we can deal with it.”

“No,” David says, nodding. “I get it. It’s fine. You hungry? That diner you took me to with Patrice last summer is nearby, right? Let’s grab some lunch and then you can come back to the dorms and I’ll give you the tour of my new digs.”

Johnny looks at him. “Please don’t ever say ‘digs.’”

“Whatever,” says David. “Lunch?”

“Sure,” says Johnny, and he starts the car.
The first thing Geno is aware of upon waking is a dull pounding in his head.

The second is an all-consuming panic low in his gut.

The loss, the party, the disgusted look on Bergeron’s face, and the way all Geno had wanted to do was hit him. His stomach heaves again and for a moment it feels like another sick wave of guilt, but then he’s tumbling out of bed, stumbling across his room for the wastebasket by the door and only making it just in time before he throws up.

He sinks down against the wall, shirt plastered to his back with clammy sweat, and tries to catch his breath, closing his eyes and willing his head to stop spinning. Geno doesn’t even hear his door open, but when he manages to open his eyes, there are a pair of socked feet.

“Holy shit,” Denis says in English, and then, switching to Russian, “what happened to you? Are you sick?”

“Tequila happened,” Geno mumbles, shutting his eyes again and letting his head fall back against the wall. “And vodka. And I’m not sure what else.”

“Yeah, smells like it,” says Denis, and even with his eyes shut he can hear the face Denis makes. “Tough loss, huh?”

“Wasn’t just the loss,” Geno says, quiet in a vain attempt to ease the pounding behind his temples, and then instantly backpedals when Denis makes a low, questioning noise. “Everything is just bad right now,” he says simply. “And I’m a terrible role model. Don’t grow up to be like me.”

Denis snorts a laugh. “Not likely,” he says. “Your taste in liquor is terrible.”

He’s gone before Geno can think up a witty retort, his thoughts slow and viscous as molasses. A moment later, though, Denis is back, crouching down to hand over a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin.

“Thanks,” Geno croaks. He takes a sip of water, and then another, letting it soothe the burning ache down his throat.

“You’re welcome,” says Denis. “You going to be alright on your own here? Mom called awhile ago, she got a catering order for this afternoon and she needs someone to come help with prep. I was just heading out.”

Geno takes another gulp of water before setting the glass down in favor of trying to fumble the cap off the aspirin. He makes the decision before he’s even consciously aware of it, blurting out, “Can I go instead?”

“Dude,” says Denis, switching over to English more seamlessly than Geno can ever accomplish. “Gross, no. Mom needs help, not someone to puke on the food.”

“I’m fine,” Geno says, sitting up a little straighter and finishing off the water. “Or, I’ll be fine enough, soon. Do I have time to shower?”

Denis is still watching him dubiously, but finally he shrugs. “It you really want to, I guess I won’t argue. Yeah, you’d better shower, though. I can smell you from here.”
Geno makes a face at him that Denis mimics back. “I just need fifteen minutes. Text Mom and tell her I’ll be there soon?”

“Sure,” says Denis, getting back to his feet and reaching down to offer Geno a hand up. “You sure you want to do this? You really look like hell.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Geno insists. Even as he thinks about it he starts to feel a little sturdier on his feet.

Denis affords him one last skeptical look before conceding. “Well, thanks, I guess. I should probably be starting my project for Science Fair, anyway.”

“Nerd,” Geno says in English, giving his brother’s shoulder a fond pat on his way to the bathroom.

“Someone had to be the brains of this family,” Denis calls breezily after him, wandering off down the hall and shutting his door with a snap that ricochets around in Geno’s throbbing head like a pinball.

His head has settled down considerably by the time he’s showered and dressed and on his way to the restaurant. His face is no better, though. For all he’d seemed like a short, skinny little lightweight, the Bergeron kid had done some damage.

“Did you put ice on that?” his mother demands by way of greeting before he’s even closed the back entrance behind himself. She narrows her eyes and reaches out with floury fingers that are surprisingly gentle as they turn his chin this way and that to inventory the damage. “It looks worse than it did last night after the game.”

Geno swallows guiltily and avoids her eyes. “No, I didn’t have time.”

“The party was more important,” she says, frank and brooking no argument as he nods once, too tired to argue. She sighs. “Well, get to work. And stay back here, will you? You’ll frighten the customers.”

The corner of her mouth twitches as she says this, though, and Geno can’t help smiling a little as she reaches up to ruffle his hair. “Is there tea?” he asks, tugging his apron off a hook by the sinks.

“Don’t insult me,” says his mother. “When you’re ready to get started, there are two balls of dough wrapped up in the big fridge next to the fillings. The order is for five hundred each of potato and mushroom.”

She hands him the order slip and he splutters, “You took this this morning and said you would have it ready for pickup by four?”

“Of course,” she says, “I told him it was no problem.” She looks up at him with a conspiratorial little smirk, already up to her elbows again in pastry flour. “Child labor.”

There’s something to be said about working with his hands, tuning out the ambient noise and clatter of the kitchen around him in favor of simple repetition; folding and pinching the little sachets of dough in steady, mindless rhythm.

Time doesn’t pass quickly, but it passes easily enough. Geno listens to Eminem, and he listens to Dre, and in between alternating trays of piroshki, he puts on his ABBA mix.

His shoulders ache from hunching over and by the time his phone buzzes with a text, he’s ready for a break. He straightens, shaking out his arms and rolling his shoulders back.
The next message adds: *I have pictures, maybe.*

Geno rolls his eyes and calls him.

“Evgeni!” Alex answers, voice big and broad, like he’s completely surprised.

Geno laughs without meaning to, knuckling idly at his temple where he can feel his headache reforming now that the distraction of work is gone.

“Alexander,” Geno says, poking his head through the swinging door and waving to his mom before slipping out the back entrance. It’s easy to fall into Russian when he says, “What do you want?”

Alex laughs. “Word from the party last night is that shit went down.”

“What did you hear?” he asks, sliding behind the wheel and starting the car. He’s still speaking Russian, even if Alex has stubbornly made the switch to English.

“What don’t I know?” Alex asks. “Some chirpy thing saw you fight with that little Causeway captain at your game, and same girl, she say she saw you fight with him again. Not really hottest story to tell before sucking my dick, I have to say.”

Geno groans. “Don’t want to know who sucks your dick, Ovi.”

“Little Causeway captain good to fight,” Alex muses. If he had a mustache, he’d be twirling it. “Has stick up his ass.”

“I’d like to take it out and hit him with it a few times,” says Geno darkly, more to himself than to Alex, who makes a delighted noise of agreement nonetheless. “You’re home, right?”

“I am,” says Alex. “Mom and Dad still downstairs in restaurant, Rachel left just before I text you.” In the background Geno can hear disjointed clattering, probably Alex rummaging through a fridge. His stomach growls.

“Can we go get some food?” Geno asks, turning off the main road onto a side street populated mainly by two-story storefronts, most of the signs in Cyrillic, and looks for parking. “I had some soup earlier at my mom’s, but that’s all since last night.”

“No, no, don’t waste money,” Alex brushes him off. “I see your car, you already park. Come up and I make.”

“Your accent is getting worse,” Geno tells him, and he looks up at the wide second story window over a restaurant on the corner in time to see a prominent middle finger aimed in his direction. He grins and waves. “Buzz me in, asshole.”

The side door buzzes and Geno lets himself in and up a narrow, dark set of wooden stairs that list cartoonishly with age as he nears the top. It’s comfortable and familiar and smells a little bit like stale cigarette smoke, much like the small sitting room he lets himself into through another door at the top landing. The space is modest but brightly lit, sunlight streaming in through two large and spotlessly clean bay windows overlooking the north and west corners of the intersection below.

From beyond a partitioning wall, Geno can hear food-making sounds; clinking of glass and the rustling of plastic bags. “Hey” he calls, following the sounds. “What are you making? If I have to
look at one more piroshki today, I’ll lose my mind.”

“This is why your accent will always be worse than mine,” Alex says in Russian, where he’s standing at the counter of a narrow kitchen. The cupboards are all painted a pleasant robin’s egg blue color that clashes magnificently with his red varsity hoodie. “You never want to practice. And wow,” he adds, eyes widening as he takes in Geno’s appearance. “Good thing I’m pretty enough for the both of us.”

“I practice plenty,” Geno grumbles. “And maybe you should look in a mirror sometime soon.”

Alex just rolls his eyes amiably. “You’re just jealous, but it’s okay. I’d be bitter, too, if a little French Canadian kid messed me up that good.”

“He’s not that small,” mutters Geno, but he sits, dragging a wooden chair in from the table across the hall and spinning it around to sit wrong way round and rest his chin on the back. He watches Alex chop celery in silence for a moment, stainless steel blade of the large kitchen knife flashing as it catches the late afternoon sun filtering in through the blinds behind him. After a moment he asks, “So, your girl said she saw me and Bergeron fighting?”

It’s meant to come off casual, but Alex glances up, a mischievous glint in his eyes when he says, “Yes she did.”

“Both times. At the game and the party?”

“Both times,” Alex agrees. “Her brother’s friend plays for Causeway, so they went to watch him, and then the party afterward. She went back to the car to look for a lighter and saw you both.” He raises his eyebrows, grinning. “Said it was a good show. Kind of hot, with you two rolling around on top of each oth—”

“You’re not funny,” Geno says loudly, cutting him off, but Alex just keeps chopping vegetables, undeterred.

“She said it, not me,” he says placidly.

Geno gives serious thought to chucking a fridge magnet at Alex from the collection on the door next to him holding up a hodgepodge of schedules, reminders, and photographs. The nearest of these features Geno and Alex at Alex’s twelfth birthday, arms around each other in front of a toxic blue cake. The sick knot in Geno’s stomach eases a little as he looks at the faded toothy grins, the matching pointed tinsel hats.

“It was a stupid mistake,” Geno says at last, after a few steadying breaths. “Two stupid mistakes. It won’t happen again.”

Alex slips past him to rummage around in the fridge. “You make it sound like it’s the end of the world to get into a little scrap or two,” he says, pulling a face at Geno once the door is closed again. “It’s good! It’ll loosen you up a little, maybe. Loosen you both up. You never used to be this stiff about the game.”

“We never used to lose so much,” Geno supplies morosely, staring down at where the toe of his sneaker scuffs at the linoleum. “And I wasn’t captain.”

“Mm,” Alex says, in vague agreement. He gives the contents of his bowl a little stir and frowns down at it, deliberating. “But you’ve lost before, lost badly. You move on, man. That’s what you’re good at.”
“I want to be good at hockey,” Geno says, irritated at the plaintive edge to his voice. “I want to be good at winning.”

“And I want to fuck underwear models,” says Alex, throwing a couple shakes of something from a glass jar into the bowl and giving it another stir before pushing it aside, apparently satisfied. “It’s good to have goals, my friend.”

Geno laughs in spite of himself, getting up finally to extract a couple of plates from a cupboard and handing them off to Alex, who drops a few pieces of bread onto them and starts assembling sandwiches.

“Didn’t you ever feel like things were different after you got named captain?” he asks. “Doesn’t the pressure get in your head a little?”

It’s a moment before Alex answers, taking his time meticulously piling chicken salad onto the bread and tearing up some lettuce before he concedes, “A little, yeah. At first.”

Geno frowns. “At first? And then what?”

“And then it got better,” Alex says simply. He hands Geno a plate with a sandwich and some cucumber slices on it, and takes the other for himself, hopping up to perch on the counter. “Or maybe it doesn’t. Not everybody’s cut out to wear the C.”

“You think I’m not cut out for it?” Geno asks sharply. He sets the plate down on his knee, eyes narrowed as he watches Alex.

For a moment, Alex looks haughty, almost annoyed, looking down at Geno over his food, but he says, “No, I think you’re plenty qualified.” After a pause, he smirks and adds, “More than the rest of those clowns you call a team, anyway. I can’t wait to play you guys next month, those are gonna be the easiest points we pick up all season.”

This time Geno does toss a magnet at his head, missing by a mile and just making Alex laugh, loud and disorderly in the neat little kitchen. “Just for that,” he says, “me and my guys are going to beat you out of spite.”

They eat their sandwiches, falling into comfortably familiar back-and-forth banter before retreating down the hall to Alex’s room for video games. Geno stays late, until well after nine o’clock, when the familiar sounds of closing time begin to drift up from the restaurant down below.

“I think I’m going to go home,” Geno says at last, sitting back where he’s positioned on the floor and setting his controller aside to crack his back. “I don’t want your parents to see me like this.”

“Yes,” Alex says. “They’ve seen enough horrors to last a lifetime, without you adding to their burden.”

“Good point,” Geno agrees gravely. “They do have to look at you every day, after all.”

He’s ready for it when Alex tackles him, going down in a laughing heap and rolling until he catches Alex by the arm, scrambling to sit on his back and pin him in victory. Alex wheezes theatrically.

“What have you been eating? Rocks? I think you’re getting fat in your old age.”

“And you’re getting slow,” Geno says. He gives the top of Alex’s head a conciliatory pat before getting to his feet.

Alex flops over onto his back, casting Geno an affronted look. “I think I’ll go have a chat with that
Causeway kid,” he says. “Learn his secrets before I see you on the ice next month.”

“Good luck,” Geno says in English. “Too stuck up for own good, just like whole Causeway team. And everybody say Consol the worst.” He snorts.

“You are,” says Alex, smiling sweetly and getting to his feet to bump Geno’s fist with his own. “But still more fun than Causeway.”
By Thursday night, Patrice is going stir crazy.

He’s got an essay for English coming up, and a poster board for US Gov he should probably be working on now, along with myriad other little odds and ends that need dealing with, and yet he can’t get himself to focus on any of it for more than thirty seconds at a time. It’s half past ten when he finally looks at his computer clock and realizes he’s been tinkering with the same unfinished sentence for the last forty-five minutes.

Rummaging through a clutter of books and papers, he dredges his phone out of the mess and unlocks the screen, deliberating. He scrolls to Segs’ number, and then Marchy’s, deliberating for a couple of minutes before he shakes his head and pockets the phone, getting up to look for a clean shirt.

The drive to Avec isn’t a long one, but by the time he gets there, he’s even more nervous than he was the first time. It’s stupid, he thinks, pulling into the gravel lot and sitting in the parked car for long, stretching moments after he’s turned the engine off. It’s stupid, and he needs to get out of his head.

He flips down the visor mirror, glancing over the healing bruises around his eye, mottled greenish yellow after nearly a week.

He thinks, fuck it.

Brandon is sitting at the bar when Patrice finally makes it inside, and Patrice beelines for the empty stool next to him, ordering a Sprite before the guy behind the bar even opens his mouth.

“Are you always here?” he asks Brandon, leaning in to be heard over the music. The place has more of a low-key coffee house thing happening tonight, as opposed to the bass-thumping club atmosphere from a couple weeks ago. Even so, his glass vibrates a little in his hand with whatever banjo-laden track is currently filtering through an imposing subwoofer in the corner behind him.

“No,” says Brandon. His easy grin fades into a frown as he sees Patrice’s face. “No, but nights like tonight I’ll bring some homework or something, and just hang out. Dude, what the hell happened to you?”

Patrice grimaces. “Rumor mill hasn’t made it as far as Madison yet, huh?”

“Dunno, maybe it has,” Brandon shrugs. “That shit usually goes right by me. Seriously, what the fuck happened?”

“Rough game,” Patrice says, opting for half-truth. “Got into it with that Malkin kid from Consol, things kind of…escalated. It looks worse than it feels.”

“It looks like he got you mixed up with the puck,” says Brandon, but he sounds impressed, nonetheless. “Shit, man. That guy’s gotta have like, fifty pounds on you, easy.”

Patrice shifts on his stool, straightening up to his full height. “Yeah, well,” he says, trying not to look smug. “Tell that to his face. Personally, I think it’s an improvement. His mother should thank me.”

Halfway through a gulp of his drink, Brandon chokes. “Wow, remind me not to piss you off.”

Patrice’s face goes hot, and he ducks his head, choosing instead to fiddle with the straw in his soda.
“Honestly it was really dumb,” he admits, barely loud enough to be heard over the music and voices. “We could’ve gotten in real trouble.”

“You didn’t, though.” It isn’t a question, Brandon’s eyebrows hiking up to flirt with his hairline as he watches Patrice, and Patrice is surprised at how grateful he feels for the calm, non-partisan input. The continued vows of revenge and retaliation by his teammates since the incident have begun to wear thin.

“Nah, not really,” he says, poking ice cubes around in his glass with the straw. “Um, I mean. I didn’t. I dunno about Malkin. I’ve never really gotten into a fight before, though, and since I didn’t start it and we won, anyway, Coach just kind of told me to get my head on straight and not to do it again.”

Brandon laughs, with a little self-deprecating grimace. “No plans to start a new career as the team enforcer?”

“Nope, sorry,” Patrice says, giving Brandon a wry grin. “I want to survive to adulthood, I think.”

“Probably for the best,” Brandon says. “Hey, speaking of, we play each other next month, right?”

“I think so.” Patrice leans down to dig his phone out of his pocket, but gets distracted by a flash of movement and jumble of loud voices from a couple tables away, a group of guys horsing around, laughing and shoving. He looks up in time to see Price among them, dancing out of reach as one of the smaller boys, all tousled blond hair and wide, grinning mouth, tries to snatch something from his hand. Price glances over in time to catch Patrice’s eye and the corner of his mouth crooks up, just enough for Patrice to feel himself blush all the way to the tips of his ears.

Beside him, Brandon clears his throat innocuously.

“Oh!” Patrice fumbles his phone, taking a second to remember what he’d been doing before thumbing through to the calendar app. His face still feels like the surface of the sun. “Sorry, right, Causeway at Madison, second weekend next month. Um. Yeah.”

When he chances a glance up, Brandon looks amused. “Cool,” he says. “Should be fun.”

“Yeah,” says Patrice, distractedly. He’s trying not to watch Price and his group of guys, but now that he’s aware of them, it’s hard not to. He recognizes PK, holding court from a stool and gesticulating expansively as he talks. Price leans in and says something, making the other guys laugh, and PK elbows him in the ribs.

Brandon takes a sip of his drink. “You could go talk to him, you know.”

“I know,” says Patrice, but he doesn’t. He orders another Sprite, and chats aimlessly about their respective teams with Brandon, all the time watching Price’s table like a total creeper from behind his glass as the MTL guys settle down and slowly begin to disperse.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” he tells Brandon, after a long moment’s silence, “but after hearing about your team through Toews for so long, it’s weird talking about Madison stuff with someone else.”

“Not one of the top six, you mean,” Brandon says, with a knowing grin, and then when Patrice opens his mouth to reply, “Dude, don’t worry about it. I like my line, I like getting to crack some skulls once in awhile, and I don’t envy the Cap’s stress levels, you know? He’s a great guy, but I think sometimes he puts too much on himself.”
“I can relate,” Patrice mutters, and Brandon snorts.

“I’m shocked. Hey, disco cowboy incoming.”

Patrice covers up a snort of laughter with an overlarge gulp of soda and ends up choking a little, looking up to find Price standing over him with eyebrows raised.

“You okay?” he asks, pointedly ignoring how Brandon has to hide his face in his own glass to cover a renewed bout of snickering.

“Yeah,” says Patrice, swallowing painfully and taking a gulp of his drink, eyes still watering a little. “Sorry, hey. Your boys all take off?”

“Uh-huh.” Ignoring Brandon completely, Price leans in, making himself comfortable against the bar. “PK had to drive Brendan home before he turned into a pumpkin. How about you? Sticking around for a little bit?”

“I guess,” says Patrice. He glances over Price’s shoulder at Brandon, and takes his look of mingled revulsion and entertainment as a go-ahead, sliding off the stool and stretching.

It still takes a concentrated effort not to come off as nervous and awkward as he feels, but if Price notices anything, he doesn’t mention it. Just steers Patrice through the door and outside around a corner, hand steady and pleasantly possessive at the small of Patrice’s back.

The chilly night air is a sharp contrast to the warm club, but it wakes Patrice up a little, clears his head in time to meet Price’s mouth with his own.

They fall back into the rough cement wall, Price bracketing Patrice’s shoulders with his hands, kissing him deep for a few long, breathless seconds before stepping back, drawing a small flask out of his pocket.

“Want some?” he asks, holding it out.

Patrice takes the flask, unscrewing the cap and sniffing the contents. “What is it?”


Patrice takes a swig, grimaces, and then has another before handing it back. It burns going down, with the familiar cheap-whiskey cloying sweetness lingering in his throat, but leaves a pleasant heat under his skin. He waits until Price’s had a couple of gulps before reaching for it again.

“You cool?” Price asks.

“Um, yeah?”

Price’s eyebrows raise, just a fraction. “So, should I ask about your face?”

“Could you not?” Patrice says, a bit more sharply than he means. The brief few minutes he’s been outside with Price are the first all week that Patrice hasn’t been thinking about his face, Malkin, that stupid night.

“Fair enough,” says Price, and he doesn’t sound hurt or annoyed. “You don’t have some secret psycho boyfriend or something, though, right?”

Patrice stares at him. “Uh, no,” he says. “No, I really don’t.”
Price grins and says, “Alright, just making sure.”

He leans back in and kisses Patrice, going for more, deeper, sucking his bottom lip and pressing for more tongue. It’s so easy to let himself fade into this; to lose time with Price kissing down his neck, their hips rutting idly together as Patrice stares up at the starless city sky.

“Want any more?” Price asks, holding out the flask again once they’ve finally drawn apart a little while, or maybe a long while, later.

Patrice takes the flask and hesitates a moment before handing it back, shaking his head. “Nah, it’s late and I drove. Um, next time?”

It’s only after he says it that he worries that maybe this is too forward; too intentful for whatever they’ve been doing here. Price, though, just smiles his easy smile and takes a swig himself before pocketing the flask again, leaning in and kissing Patrice with warm, whiskey-flavored lips.


Patrice ducks back into the club before he leaves a little while later, glad to find Brandon still at his position by the bar, nose buried in *The Pearl*.

“Hey,” Patrice says, nudging him with an elbow. “I just wanted to say goodbye before I take off.”

Brandon looks up in surprise, marking the page of his book with a folded corner before setting it down and digging around in the messenger bag slung over the back of his seat. “Oh hey,” he says. “I’m glad you did. Hold up a sec, I wanna give you my number, um. Like. Just in case or whatever.”

*Just in case or whatever?* Patrice echoes, wryly amused. “You mean in case I get kidnapped by a goalie or something?”

“Or something,” says Brandon, rolling his eyes even as he laughs. “Dude, whatever, you don’t have to take it.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean,” Patrice trails off, finally shrugging when he can’t find the right words. “Gimme your number, I’ll give you mine. Buddy system or whatever, right?”

“Right,” says Brandon. "Buddy system or whatever."
Johnny’s loved Pat for the better part of two years. He can remember the exact second when he looked at Pat, and Pat wasn’t just ‘that annoying kid from summer training camp’ anymore.

Johnny can remember the exact second he thought, *hey, and maybe.*

Big Buff was having a party, one of the first Johnny had been invited to as a member of the varsity squad. He felt small and awkward in the midst of all the hulking upperclassmen, smiling tightly at guys wandering past where he was busy holding up a wall with a can of root beer. Dan Carcillo had found him, finally, slinging an arm around his shoulders and jostling amiably. He’d smelled sharp and acrid, like liquor and cigarettes.

"What," Dan had said. "We not good enough for you?"

Johnny had laughed, shaking his head, but a moment later he’d spotted Pat over Dan’s shoulder. He was flushed from the heat in the packed room, and looking nearly as lost as Johnny felt. Johnny watched as he fiddled with the cup he was holding, turning it in his fingers as he talked to some kid with goofy ears sticking out from under an even goofier haircut. He looked vaguely familiar, definitely not from school, but from -- somewhere. Pat had leaned into him and smiled, and something shifted low in Johnny’s chest at the sight of it.

"Who is that?" Johnny had asked, gesturing with his beer.

"Kaner, idiot, duh," Dan said, and Johnny rolled his eyes.

"I meant *with* him," he said, but Dan wasn’t listening.

"Holy shit, that’s Kelly DeSoto," Dan said, elbowing Johnny in the side and pointing at the far wall, away from Pat and the kid with the ears. "Dude, I invited her, but I didn’t think she’d actually show, holy shit!"

He waved, catching her attention and grinning ear to ear as she made her way over.

"Hey, Dan," said Kelly DeSoto, her voice low in a way that made Johnny want to just melt back into the wallpaper behind him and disappear. He might have, for all the notice she took of him, and Dan didn’t even seem to notice as he began edging away from the both of them.

Johnny just caught Dan’s dopey, "Hey, back," before making a beeline to where Pat was still standing with the kid; cheeks flushed pink as he looked at Pat from under those stupid, floppy bangs.

"Kaner," Johnny said, loud enough that they both stopped their conversation and turned. "Hey, man."

Pat lit up at the sight of him, bright and beaming. "Tazer, you’re here! Hey," he hesitates, glancing over at the kid next to him. "You know Sam Gagner? He goes to Edmonton Municipal, but we did mites and peewee together. Sam, this is Johnny Toews. He plays at Madison with me."

He said the last part importantly, chest puffed out, and beaming approvingly when the kid, Sam, nodded, giving Johnny a lasting once-over. "We did a weekend clinic camp last year, right?"

Oh, yeah. "Oh, yeah," Johnny said. He’d tried to smile, but for some reason his face didn’t want to cooperate. "Knew you looked familiar."
Then they’d all gone silent, awkward. Johnny had been nearly at the point of bringing up the weather when Pat had said, "Hey, man. It's getting kind of cramped in here. You want to go outside with me for a minute? I had a question about the practice schedule this week."

Johnny said, “Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Sam looked like they’d just kicked him.

“I’ll be back in a minute, dude, I swear,” Pat told him, and Sam just shrugged.

“You do you. I’m gonna grab another drink.”

He wandered off without a backward glance, and Pat had taken Johnny’s elbow, steering him through the crowd and out the the porch.

Outside, it was cold, especially after the heat of the house. Pat shivered, hopping up on the railing to sit and hugging his arms around himself.

Johnny rolled his eyes. "You should've just mentioned you were cold, loser."

"I'm not," Pat muttered, but Johnny could hear his teeth chattering. He’d laughed, shrugging out of his own hoodie, and tossing it to Pat, who caught it, tugging it on without further protest.

“Kind of a dick move to leave your friend in there by himself,” Johnny said, quietly. He hopped up, too, perching next to Pat on the railing. “You could’ve just texted me about the schedule.”

“The schedule?” Pat had looked confused for a moment. “Oh, right. Nah, I don’t actually have a question. There were just a lot of people and I needed an excuse, I dunno.”

“Oh,” Johnny said. He glanced up, and Pat’s eyes were bright under the porch light. Bright and blue and trained on him. Johnny looked away again, cheeks flushing. “Well, still. You didn’t have to ditch--”

"Can I kiss you?"

Johnny had looked up again and Pat was still watching him, but he’d gone pink, all the way to the roots of his hair.

Johnny’s mind was racing, frantic. Someone might see. Someone might say something. They were right out in the open, there were people everywhere.

Pat leaned forward.

They were right out in the open, there were people everywhere.

Someone might see.

Johnny didn’t care.

He leaned in to meet Pat halfway, kissing him with everything he had.

School the following Monday had been interesting.

--

On Saturday night, Johnny doesn’t sleep.
He’d spent the day with David, aggressively avoiding any subject even tangentially related to Pat, which meant that by the time they’d headed home for dinner, they’ve exhausted just about every other topic Johnny can think of. Their mother takes advantage of the uncharacteristically quiet meal to grill them both about midterms, and by the time she’s finished, he’s more than ready to slip upstairs and get ready for bed, even though it’s not even nine o’clock on a Saturday night.

He forces himself not to check his phone every thirty seconds, but even when he finally does as he’s getting into bed, there’s nothing. No texts, no goofy pictures, no missed calls. None of the usual barrage Pat’s usually sent by now, if they haven’t seen each other in twelve hours.

Johnny turns his phone on silent, turns out the light, and lies down facing the wall. He makes it about half a minute before huffing, turning over, and checking his phone again, just to be safe. After a few repeats of this, he turns the sound back on.

He tries listening to music. He tries watching a movie in the Netflix app. He tosses and turns, dozing every now and then, only to be jarred back awake by more racing thoughts.

The sun rises cold and blue, casting long shadows through his blinds that Johnny watches as they slide across the wall like long fingers reaching toward him. Birds start a racket in the tree outside, and a car passes by with the radio blaring.

Johnny picks up his phone for the millionth time and stares at the screen. He stares until he can make out the faint silhouette of his own reflection in the black surface, and the room is bright around him. Finally, he turns it on, pulls up Pat’s contact, and hits send.

“Hello?”

Pat’s voice is sleepy and distant, and for a long moment, Johnny flounders.

“Hello? Johnny, are you there?”

“Yeah.” Johnny’s voice comes out more like a croak, dry and hoarse. “Sorry, um. I didn’t know if you’d answer.”

“It’s like, seven thirty in the morning on a Sunday, dude,” Pat says, blearily. “My phone woke me up. What’d you expect?”

“Sorry,” Johnny says again. He’s already hugely regretting this. “I just. I wanted to talk.”

There’s a pause. Johnny thinks he can hear blankets rustling. Pat sounds more awake when he says, “Is everything-- I mean. Are you okay?”

“I dunno,” Johnny says. He flops back, dropping an arm over his eyes and blocking out the light. “It’s been a weird couple of days.”

“Don’t like fighting with you,” Pat says, so quiet Johnny almost doesn’t hear him. “If we could just stop doing that forever, that’d be great.”

Johnny laughs, the sound slipping out through the tightness in his chest, surprising even him. “Pat, you pick fights with me over everything.”

“Well yeah,” Pat agrees. It sounds like he’s smiling, too. “But that’s fun.”

“You’re a douche,” Johnny tells him.
“Yeah,” Pat agrees. “You’re into it, though.”

Neither of them says anything for a long moment after that, letting the silence crowd around them. Johnny can hear Pat’s breath, and the little blanket-rustling noises of movement as the seconds tick by.

“Yeah, Pat,” he says, at last. “Guess I am.”

Pat makes a low noise, stifling a cough or a laugh, Johnny can’t tell which.

“I was a total dick,” he says. “I’m really sorry.”

“For the fight?” Johnny thinks he hears Pat’s breath hitch, and he curls his hands into fists as he waits for the reply.

“For the fight, yeah,” Pat says, quietly. “For all the dumb shit over the past couple weeks. “I guess I’ve just been stressed out.”

“I was a dick, too,” Johnny says. “Fuck it, can this just be over? Can we just go back to being us, and talk about something else?”

“Fuck,” Pat says. "Yeah."

Johnny says, “Wanna meet me for breakfast? That one diner by the multiplex we went to with Patrice.”

“Yeah,” says Pat again. His voice is so suddenly **him**, so suddenly familiar, that Johnny nearly gasps at the wave of intense, overwhelming longing that sweeps through him. Instead, he just clutches the phone to his ear with white knuckles as Pat adds, “Just gimme like, forty minutes so I can shower and stuff, ‘kay?”

“Okay.”

Pat hesitates. “You cool, man? You sound sort of, like, I dunno. Out of it or something.”

Johnny rubs at his eyes. “Yeah, I’m fine. I just slept badly, is all.”

“Well, get your ass moving, and we’ll fill you up with so much shitty diner coffee, you won’t feel tired for a week.” Pat snickers at his own stupid humor and Johnny rolls his eyes.

“Right. See you in forty, Pat.”

“See you, Pookie Pie,” Pat says, and he sounds so **normal**. Teasing with stupid pet names he knows Johnny hates; giggling before he hangs up.

He sounds like everything Johnny remembers; everything he’d wanted, sitting on the porch railing at Big Buff’s party, years ago. Johnny sits and stares at his phone, long after the call goes dead.
“This is terrible idea,” Geno says, staring out the passenger side window as Alex parallel parks.

The house across the street is all lit up, floodlights in the front yard illuminating a scattering of people, while the front door opens and closes every few seconds as more come and go. He can already hear the bass line of the music from where he’s sitting in the car.

“No,” Alex says assuredly. “Good idea. All my ideas are good ideas. Someday you will learn this.”

Geno just casts him a baleful look. “Are we even invited?”

“Yes!” says Alex, and then, “Sort of. I know a girl, plays basketball for Madison. She tell me about it. Said Patrick Kane having party tonight, and inviting half the state.”

“Uh-huh,” Geno says, rolling his eyes. He gets out of the car, tugging his hoodie tighter about himself as a gust of wind sends a whirlwind of dried leaves skittering around their ankles. “So when you say you want to take me to party, distract me from worry about games and fights, you really mean we here so you can chase girl.”

Alex grins, teeth flashing white in the sodium glow of streetlights. “Maybe little bit of both,” he concedes, holding the front gate for Geno, who affords him a level, unamused look before brushing past.

Any real concerns Geno may have had about the two of them standing out dissipate quickly as they make their way inside. Apparently Alex’s basketball player had been right about the attendance, and he spots guys he recognizes from at least four different teams before they even make it to the kitchen.

Geno grabs a beer for himself from a cooler next to the counter and holds out a second one for Alex before realizing that Alex is already halfway across the room, bumping his hoodie tighter about himself as a gust of wind sends a whirlwind of dried leaves skittering around their ankles. “So when you say you want to take me to party, distract me from worry about games and fights, you really mean we here so you can chase girl.”

He waffles a moment before just stuffing the extra beer into his hoodie pocket and retreating back the way they’d come, down the crowded hall past the dimly lit dining room and a sitting room that seems to be the origin of the window-rattling music, out onto the front porch. Skirting a group of guys in Edmonton Municipal jackets seemingly embroiled in a heated debate about fishing, he takes a seat on the lowest step and breathes a sigh of relief, finally popping the tab on his beer and taking a gulp.

It’s nice here, in a sort of generic suburban way; the house behind him a color-varied doppelganger of those on either side, but with a distinct air of lived-in homeliness. From around the side of the house comes the occasional crescendoed shout or burst of laughter, as the party begins to spill out into the back yard, and Geno wonders how long the tall hedges on either side separating this property from the ones next to it will be enough to keep neighborly concern at bay.

He sips his beer slowly, content to let his ass go numb on the chilly brick step, messing around with his phone as snatches of nearby conversations drift past like more fallen leaves on the wind. The Edmonton guys seem to settle their debate, trucking past him down the steps to disappear in the direction of the backyard without a second glance.

Geno’s phone buzzes in his hand, a text from Alex that reads *Where r u???
Front porch, he sends back, and a moment later his phone buzzes again.

I found girl, u come find us. She has friends )))

He stares at the screen for a long moment before turning it off and slipping it back into his pocket. The frustration has ebbed, but he isn’t willing quite yet to give up this little moment of solitude.

As if on cue, he hears the front door open and then bang shut again, a jumble of voices and footsteps erasing the brief quiet as quickly as it had come. Geno just ignores them, setting his first empty aside and opening the second beer, well out of sight of the group on the porch above. He tunes in abruptly a few minutes later, though, when he hears someone mention his school.

“Not like Consol,” someone says, a guy’s voice. Then laughter.

Geno turns his head, straining to hear more, but the effort isn’t necessary. The wind has died down a little, and they’re close enough that even with the perpetual thrum of bass the next voice still sounds familiar.

“Yeah, we’ve got to get our shit together.” He’s only heard it a couple of times before, but Geno recognizes this voice all the same. “MTL gave us a serious run tonight, I think we got lucky. Consol didn’t even put up a fight last week, it was pathetic. They’re not all gonna be so easy.”

There’s a derisive snort and then the first voice adds, “They’re fucking overrated, dude. Think they’re hot shit because they’re rich prep school douchebags, I hope we taught them a lesson.”

“God, Segs,” says a third voice. “Shut your huge mouth or someone’s gonna teach you a lesson. You don’t know who all is here.”

“You want a lesson, fuckface?” says Segs, and for a moment things dissolve into scuffling and swearing and obnoxious laughter.

After a moment things calm down, and the familiar voice says, “You assholes need a minute, or can we go check out the backyard?”

“Fuck off,” says Segs casually. “Sure, I’ll meet you guys back there, I gotta grab my jacket from inside.”

“Get me another beer while you’re in there,” says the third voice.

“Get one your damn self. I’m not your butler, Marchand,” says Segs, and then, “Ow, fucker, stop hitting me!”

“Stop being a prick and I will,” says Marchand. “Fine, Bergy, we’ll catch up to you.”

Geno hears the door open and close again, before a single set of footsteps makes its way across the porch and quickly down the steps toward him. He barely has time to get stiffly to his feet and turn around before he’s confronted face to face with Patrice Bergeron, drawing up short on the step just above Geno, his eyes going wide with recognition.


“Hi,” says Geno shortly. “Heard you talking.”

“Congratulations,” Bergeron says, trying to push past, but Geno stands solid in his way. “Dude, fuck off. Like you’ve never talked shit before about Causeway.”
“You think Consol pathetic,” Geno says, and it’s not meant to be a question. He glares down at Bergeron, who meets his eyes with unwavering contempt. “Think we easy.”

Bergeron rolls his eyes theatrically. “Well, you didn’t exactly make it hard for us, man. What do you want me to tell you?”

“Want you to keep your fucking mouth shut,” Geno fires back, hands balled into fists at his sides as he leans into Bergeron’s space, for all the good it does. Bergeron is either patently stupid, or maybe just too drunk to be properly intimidated. “Not talk shit about Consol. Your friend right, maybe somebody try and teach you lesson.”

“God,” says Bergeron. “It’s not my fault your team keeps eating shit. Maybe they just need a better captain.”

These words hang in the air between them for a long, weighted pause. So long that he thinks Bergeron is actually waiting for it when Geno finally hauls off and hits him, air leaving his lungs with an exaggerated whuh as Geno’s fist connects with his ribcage.

His knuckles graze Geno’s lip a second later, and Geno feels the sharp sting of the half-healed split reopening; tastes blood warm and tinny over his teeth. He lunges forward, aiming fists anywhere he can, and Bergeron does the same, stumbling from the step and sending them both half-tripping into the grass below.

Geno doesn’t even register the other voices around them until there are hands on him, trying to pull him away, and Bergeron falls back, too, dragged by two guys Geno recognizes as more Causeway players. He glances over his shoulder, trying to figure out who has him in a vice grip, and sees their enormous top-line left winger glaring back at him.

“Let go,” Geno snarls. The kid’s eyes just narrow dangerously, jaw set.

“Stop punching my captain,” he says. Geno tries to shake him off, but his fingers just tighten, digging painfully into Geno’s biceps.

A few feet away, Bergeron is still struggling, trapped between his friends. “Let me go, Tyler,” he snarls, and the taller of the two guys looks for a moment like Bergeron just slapped him, but doesn’t let go. “Seriously you guys, I’m fine!”

The shorter guy says, “Man, that’s what you said last weekend, remember? Like, when you gave us that whole talk about not retaliating and whatever?”

Geno actually sees the moment Bergeron goes slack in their grip, sagging in on himself a little. He glances up and meets Geno’s eyes, still glaring, but with the wind clearly blown from his sails.

“Fine,” he says after a moment, still glaring at Geno and finally shaking his friends off. He wipes his hands on his jeans, leaving a smudge of blood across the seafoam green denim over his right thigh. Geno licks his lip reflexively and tastes blood, still warm and dripping from the cut there. “Come on, let’s go.”

He leads the way past Geno, still flanked by his two edgy looking friends, and the guy holding Geno finally lets his grip slacken, as well. He says, “Stay the fuck away from us, yeah? From him.”

Geno puts some distance between them, glaring as he wipes his lip off with the back of his hand, but nodding. “Tell him stay fuck away from me,” he snarls. “I not the one talking shit. You tell him watch where he open mouth.”
The kid’s eyebrows go up, but he doesn’t say anything else; just gives Geno a long, scrutinizing stare before turning on his heel and following his teammates where they’d disappeared around the side of the house. Geno watches him disappear, only aware once he’s alone again of the crowd that seems to have gathered.

He looks around, heart hammering suddenly, even more than it had in his rage at Bergeron, searching for an escape route. The backyard is obviously out of bounds, but the entrance to the house is now blocked by a cluster of wide-eyed, staring teenagers. To his horror, he catches sight of at least a couple phones out.

He’s never been so glad to see Alex in his life, when he materializes seemingly out of nowhere, parting the crowd with a tall, dark-haired girl in the shortest skirt Geno’s ever seen in tow. Alex grabs his arm, firm but hardly the Causeway kid’s iron vice-grip, and steers him down the path and back out into the street in the direction of the car.

“Hey,” Geno says, looking back to where everyone seems to have already dispersed, wandering back to their regularly scheduled party doings, now that the excitement is over. “We don’t have to go if you--”

“No, we should probably go,” Alex says over him, but he looks more amused than anything. “I tell Stephanie we give her ride, anyway. I drop her off after you.”

He stumbles over her name, but Stephanie only gives him a comically charmed smile, and Geno will never understand the effect this guy has on girls, especially ones as hot as this one. She turns big, mascara-heavy eyes on Geno and says, “If that’s not too much trouble?”

Now it’s Geno’s turn to be amused. “Is no trouble,” he assures her, and pointedly slides into the back seat when Alex unlocks the car doors for them. His lip is still bleeding sluggishly, and he holds the cuff of his hoodie sleeve to it. He’s only just beginning to feel the other places Bergeron’s fists managed to make contact, unseen bruises beginning to throb dully now that he has time to think about them.

Alex glances back at him in the rearview mirror, crooked smile quirking his lips as he says, “We inside, I hear guys yelling, ‘Fight! Fight!’ and when we get there I see you and Causeway captain beating the crap out of each other.”

Geno leans back in his seat, tipping his head against the window and staring out at the rapidly passing houses, and makes a noise of disgust in his throat. “Wonderful,” he says.

“I hear one guy say Bergeron slept with your girlfriend. Other guy say you insult his mother,” Alex says.

“Do you even have a girlfriend?” Alex asks, glancing back again and sounding interested, and also a little indignant. “You never get girlfriend and don’t tell me.”

“No girlfriend,” Geno says loudly, before either of them can keep talking. “Stephanie right, mostly. He insulted Consol team, insulted me.” He stops before going into detail, the echo of Bergeron’s words, maybe they just need a better captain, ratcheting around inside his head and making his stomach turn.

“Bullshit,” says Alex. “Maybe I turn this car around, go back and help you make point, eh?”

It’s weirdly sweet, especially with the fierceness Geno catches in Alex’s expression as it’s
illuminated in the rearview mirror by the headlights of a passing car. “No,” he says firmly. “Not needing to get you in trouble, too.”

Alex just shrugs and says, “You tell me if change your mind.”

After another minute or so of silence, Stephanie digs out her iPod and hooks it up to the car converter, flooding the already cramped space with Miley Cyrus and putting an end to any further conversation. Geno presses his cheek to the cold window glass, counting headlights until they all begin to blur together and he lets himself drift, dozing and unrestful, thinking about old wounds and new bruises and how hard it’s going to be to look at himself in the mirror tomorrow.
Wow it would be so great if I ever actually labeled my chapters right. \o/

“I have tutoring after practice,” Patrice says. “No.”

"Nice try," says Marchy, “but I vote yea.” He looks over at Segs, who’s shouldering on his backpack. “What say you, young Seguin?”

Segs thumps him hard on the shoulder. “Me too. Or, like, I also vote yea?”

Patrice never should have encouraged these idiots to take Civics with him.

“Yeah, that’s great and all, but I’m just not in the fucking mood to drive all the way to Edmonton,” he says. “I have tutoring, and I fucked up that quiz, and I’m just not feeling it. Sorry.”

“I’m just not feeling it,” Marchy mocks. “Sorry I'm boring.”

“Eighty-nine is not fucking up, man,” Segs says. “You know what I would do to get an eighty-nine on a math test? Shit.”

“Pretty sure Ms. Adams doesn’t accept bribery in the form of dick pics, bro,” Patrice snorts, and Segs makes a face at him.

“That was one time,” he whines, ignoring Marchy roaring with laughter. “The one fucking time I sent a text to the wrong person, it had to be that one.”

“Maybe someday you’ll finally cave and tell us who it was actually for,” Marchy snickers, wiping his eyes on his cuff, still giggling. “Maybe this really does explain you acing world history last year.”

“Shut up,” says Segs. “I hate you both.”

“I’m just saying,” Marchy says, wrapping his arms around both their shoulders, even as Segs tries to elbow him off. “We don’t have a game tonight, it’s a Friday, and Madison’s probably handing Edmonton their asses as we speak. We’ll get up there just in time to comfort all their girls. I don’t see a downside here.”

“What if some of us just want to go home and study?” Patrice asks, but nobody seems to hear him.

“Yo Kruggie!” Marchy yells across the parking lot at Torey Krug, shuffling toward them with his arms already full of books and followed by Adam McQuaid. “If you forfeit your study session with Bergy here, we’ll take you guys to a party up by Edmonton Municipal.”

“Hell yeah,” Krug says, excitedly. “I told my mom I was staying over at Quaider’s tonight, anyway.”

He casts a pleading glance over his shoulder at McQuaid, who shrugs amiably. “Sure, I just gotta text my dad.”

Patrice narrows his eyes at Krug, but the annoying thing about douchebag freshmen is that they don’t
have the smarts to do anything but grin back.

“Come on, Berg. It’s a Friday night! We don’t have a game tonight or practice tomorrow. Let’s go have some fun!”

“Fine,” he says, at last. “Fine. But no drinking,” he adds waringly, stuffing his backpack in the trunk. “You’re fourteen. No drinking, no weed, try not to have sex—”

“Yeah, because that part’ll take a lot of effort.” Krug cuts Patrice off, with a sardonic eyeroll. “I didn’t realize I was signing up to become a monk when I started hanging out with you.”

McQuaid giggles. “Aw, kiddo, you’ve got so much to learn. You don’t try to question Bergy on this stuff. You just nod and smile and sneak away as soon as his hypocritical ass pops open a fourth beer.”

“Bergy,” Marchy says, smoothly cutting off Patrice’s enraged spluttering retort before it’s even fully formed. “Let the kid have some fun. It’s not like you won’t be playing designated anyway, right?”

“Fuck off,” Patrice says, petulantly. He shoves Marchy out of the front seat as Marchy tries to slide in next to him, calling over his indignant protestations to Segs, “Hey, you haven’t been a complete dick to me in the last forty-five seconds. You can take shotgun tonight and Marchy gets to sit in the back with Quaider, where freshmen and asshole traitors belong.”

Segs whoops and gets in, as Marchy piles into the backseat with Krug and McQuaid, still grumbling.

To be fair, the ride up to Edmonton is pretty. It’s a nice night, nice enough that the chill in the air feels fresh instead of frigid through their open windows, and by the time they pull up to the Hall house, Patrice can’t sustain his irritation.

This placid lull fades, however, as he finds parking down the driveway and turns off the ignition. It’s quickly replaced tight anxiety, looking up the drive at the big house with its overbright floodlights illuminating a manicured lawn full of milling kids. This is all too familiar, too soon. He should have taken more time to collect himself after last weekend, the evidence of which is still plain as day all over his face in mottled greens and purples.

There’s been something caged uncomfortably in his chest all week; something ugly and unrestful, and he’s grateful when Marchy catches his arm as they’re walking up the driveway, tugging him off to the side.

“Uh, hey, man,” Patrice replies. “What’s up?”

Marchy pauses, a weird, incongruously serious expression on his face as his eyes seem to search over Patrice.

“I think I know why you didn’t want to come to this thing,” he says, “I know what you’re worried about. But dude, Consol’s playing tonight. No way is your Russian asshole nemesis gonna make the drive out here just to start some more shit with you.”

“I know,” Patrice says, but the ugly thing in his chest disagrees, and a few too-sober hours later, they’re proven wrong.

Because of-fucking-course they are.

He’s long-since given up policing his guys, settling instead for playing a distracted game of cards with some of the Edmonton kids. He doesn’t bother asking anybody’s name, but they’re all friendly
enough. Patrice is pretty sure the tall blond kid is their host, though, and the unsubtle sidelong glances he keeps throwing his gap-toothed buddy from behind his poker hand reminds Patrice of Johnny and Pat. He smirks to himself under pretense of rearranging his cards.

He’s not even thinking when he glances up, distantly registering the tall, dark guy blocking the far doorway with a bottle of something clear dangling from his fingertips. His stomach tightens before he even recognizes Malkin.

Malkin is either drunk or exhausted or both. Patrice can see it in the slant of his shoulders silhouetted against the kitchen light behind him, and in the way he lets his head drop against the doorframe, seemingly unaware of the guy next to him, also in a Consol hoodie and gesticulating animatedly in one-sided conversation.

“Dude, are you in or out?”

Patrice is brought back to himself abruptly to find the gap-toothed kid watching him beadily over his cards. He glances down at his own hand before shaking his head.

“Nah, I fold. Deal me out next round, I gotta use the bathroom. Uh,” he hesitates awkwardly, “which is where, exactly?”

“Down the hall, third door on your left,” the blond tells him, without looking up.

Patrice gets up, beelining for the hallway, mercifully in the opposite direction of Malkin and his Consol buddy. He does sort of have to pee, but there’s a small cluster of people waiting in line outside the bathroom, so he skirts around them, ducking into what looks like an office with a television set up against the far wall. Krug is there with a couple other guys, all zeroed in on the video game blaring on the screen.

“Hey,” Patrice says, prodding his shoulder a few times until Krug turns his head. “Wanna get out of here?”

“Uhhh,” Krug says. He glances longingly back at the screen. “No? I’m in the middle of something, here, dude.”

Patrice doesn’t want to whine. He’s not going to whine. “No tutoring for a week,” he blurts, and immediately kind of hates himself.

“Here, take this,” Krug says, handing his remote to the kid next to him, and crossing his arms as he takes a few steps out of the fray. “I’m listening. You gonna do all my homework, too?”

In his three years as a tutor, Patrice has never done another student’s homework for them. Not even Marchy and Segs. Not even when they begged.

“Yes,” he says, and feels like a total sucker when Krug starts to giggle.

“What the fuck is up with you, man?” Krug asks. “Have you been body-snatched or some shit? You’re kinda freaking me out.” He sways gently in place, giggling at his own joke.

“I thought I told you not to drink,” Patrice tells him, leading the way outside.

Krug follows, digging around in his pockets before producing a pack of gum. “Okay, no, you’re still you.”

“Ha ha,” Patrice intones, but he accepts the gum when Krug offers.
He settles on an artfully arranged outcropping of rocks near the edge of the Halls’ yard closest to the street, just out of range of the floodlights. Krug plunks down next to him, heaving a sigh.

“Is this because that Russian dude showed up? Malkin?” Krug asks. He pops a piece of gum in his mouth and pushes his hair out of his face. “I saw him go past with a bunch of his guys. But, like, that house is huge. You can avoid him. We can all avoid him, and you can definitely stop from punching his face in. Again.”

“I don’t want,” Patrice says, but the words crowd too tight in his throat. He has to swallow a couple of times, grateful for the gum as a distraction from the choking feeling. “I don’t want to punch his face in. I don’t even know why that keeps happening.”

Krug hums, bumping their shoulders together. “’Cause he’s annoying. I’d want to punch a bro too, if he was saying fucked up shit about my mom.”

“Wait, what?” Patrice frowns. “Who was saying shit about my mom?”

“The giant Russian,” says Krug.

“Malkin was talking shit about my mother? How do you—oh. Did Marchy tell you that’s why we kept getting into it? You know he’s full of shit, like, all of the time, right?”

Krug shrugs.

“I don’t know, man. He had to have gotten under your skin somehow, right? It’s not like you to go off like that.”

For a douchebag freshman, Torey Krug can be inconveniently perceptive.

“You’re right,” Patrice says. He takes a deep, calming breath, willing his nerves to settle. “It’s a big house. I was just being stupid.”

Krug just shrugs again, snapping his gum and standing up.

“Ready to go back in? I really wanted to help those guys beat the level.”

Patrice snorts, but gets up, brushing himself off and stretching. “Glad you’ve got your priorities in order.”

He drops Krug back off at his game, and resolves to try the bathroom again, but the line seems to have just gotten longer. There’s a flight of stairs leading up off the far end of the hall, and Patrice heads for them on a whim, hoping to discover a less-crowded option. It’s only when he’s coming back down, having guiltily snuck in and used the master ensuite, that he spots Malkin, his lanky frame leaning heavily against the banister below.

“I hate losing,” Patrice hears him say, and even through the heavy accent, it’s obvious that he’s drunk. “I hate to lose. Why we keep losing?”

The shorter guy next to him pats him on the shoulder. “Geno, man, we’re just in a slump. We’ve had them before, right? It blows, but fuck it, it’s early in the season. We can get our shit together.”

“Have slumps,” Malkin says, morosely. Where he’s standing frozen and unnoticed at the top of the stairs, Patrice can clearly hear the misery in his voice, the desperation. “But I wasn’t captain when we have those slumps.”
Talk about your downer drunks, Patrice thinks, even as something deep down inside him flinches in commiseration. Shit.

“Christ,” says the other guy. “I kind of don’t know whether to punch you or hug you right now.”

Malkin laughs, or groans, it’s hard to tell which, pushing his hands into his hair. It’s the first time Patrice has noticed his hair. It’s thick and dark, and sticks up at crazy angles as he tugs fingers through it.

He can’t stop thinking about the harsh, breathless sounds Malkin had made the first time they’d fought, ugly and raw, and his stomach seizes up with nerves again, getting tighter and tighter.

They’ve moved away from the banister at the foot of the stairs by a few paces now, Malkin swaying slightly on his feet and the other kid swigging quietly from a beer. Patrice seizes the opportunity for a hasty escape, hugging the wall and making his way down the stairs while keeping eyes trained on the two Consol boys.

The downside of this is how he’s so distracted watching, he trips down the last three stairs and nearly lands right on top of them.

“Bergeron,” says Malkin. He sounds surprised, confused, like he can’t quite remember what’s supposed to come next. Patrice can relate.

“Sorry,” he says, righting himself quickly and backing away. The shorter kid seems to be getting with the program quicker than Malkin is, eyes narrowed dangerously as he lowers his beer. “I just tripped, and I wasn’t, I mean. I didn’t hear, uh. Sorry. Sorry you guys lost again. That’s super shitty.”

Shut up shut up shut up.

They’re both staring at him. The shorter kid with beady, dangerous eyes; Malkin somewhat blearily.

“Anyway,” Patrice manages, when the silence has stretched on long past the point of awkward. “Bye.”

It’s not that he runs out of the house, he’s got way too much poise for that. It’s more like a healthy speed-walk, pushing his way out of the front door again and beelining for his car.

Segs is making out with a girl in the backseat. Her shirt is rucked up over her bra, her hands curled tight in his hair. Patrice pounds on the window, but they ignore him.

Malkin’s right inside. Patrice could go back in there and pick a fight easy as pie. He could say anything and have Malkin right at his throat. Possibly. Assuming Malkin is still standing, and could keep Patrice in focus long enough to throw a punch. And then everything would just make sense again.

Wow. Patrice doesn’t even recognize his own life, anymore.

He doesn’t go inside. Instead, he knocks harder against the window and yells through the glass. “Out. Out of my car, man. You want to get laid, you go get it on in the bathroom like a normal person.”

The girl startles, hurriedly tugging her shirt down. “Wait,” the girl says, looking from Segs to Patrice and back again. “This isn’t your car?”

Segs doesn’t even have the decency to blush. “We share it, baby. Come on. He’ll calm down.”
“Get out of my car,” Patrice says again, louder and through gritted teeth. He must sound serious, because this time Segs and the girl actually follow orders.

He collapses in the driver’s seat, and a second later, the passenger door opens and Segs drops down next to him.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey,” Patrice replies. He has a headache beginning to pound in his temples, and he hates everything about being designated driver.

“You gonna tell me what’s wrong?” Segs asks, quietly.

Patrice takes a breath and then another, and says, “I’m not the kind of person that’s ever gotten into fights before, Ty. I have no idea what the fuck is going on with me.”

Segs is quiet for a long time, but eventually he says, “Nothing, man. That Russian kid is just annoying.”

Patrice lets his breath out slowly, nodding and pressing his forehead against the wheel.

“Sure,” he says. “Yeah, that’s probably it.”

He sighs, leaning back in his seat and glancing over at Segs, taking in the smug mouth, disheveled hair, and burgeoning hickey just visible above the collar of his shirt. “And just for the record,” he adds, “Shotgun privileges are totally revoked. You’re riding in the backseat on the way home.”
Johnny is drunk.

“Pat’s parents are gonna fucking kill him,” Crawford says gleefully, stepping past where Johnny is operating only semi-effectively as a wedge to keep the door open, and adjusting his grip on the two cases of beer he has balanced in his arms. “How the hell is he getting away with this?”

Johnny glances around the house, at the early stages of chaos already underway. “His parents told him he could only have teammates over while they’re gone.”

“Yeah, but do you think they meant all his teammates at once?” Crow smirks, and Johnny shrugs.

“They just said only teammates, and no casualties.” He stumbles a bit over the last word. Jack Daniels always makes his tongue kinda numb.

Crow nudges him onward down the hall, and they duck past a herd of JV guys led by Shaw, thundering down the hall and yelling something about beer pong.

“What happens if someone does die?” Crow asks dubiously, casting a significant glance in the direction Shaw and his boys had disappeared. He grabs a beer for himself and leans back against the counter, taking a long sip.

“I have a map of Canada in my glove box,” says Johnny, and Crow laughs, but then sobers at the look on Johnny’s face.

“Oh. You’re not kidding.”

Johnny shakes his head and helps himself to a chip from a bowl behind them. “Not even a little, dude.”

“Well,” says Crawford. “Good to know.”

They hang out in comfortable silence for a few minutes, or rather, they let the conversation drop in the ambient din of the party around them. Somebody, probably Bicks, has commandeered Mr. Kane’s stereo system in the living room to pump Kanye West through the house over the buzz of conversation and liquored-up ruckus.

Johnny sways comfortably in place, poking around in the chip bowl and considering tracking down supplies for another Jack and diet. Crow lip-syncs along with Power between swigs of beer.

Pat wanders in through the big sliding glass doors that look out over the backyard and beams, coming over and insinuating himself easily into Johnny’s space, slipping an arm around his waist.

“Hey, drunkie” Pat shouts over the noise, and Johnny ducks down to kiss his grinning mouth, giving his shoulders a little squeeze.

“Hey yourself,” he says against Pat’s cheek. “Carbomb didn’t want to do shots alone, it would’ve been rude to refuse. Where’ve you been?”

“Krugs and Fro were doing some kind of weirdass drinking game and needed an official,” Pat says, shrugging. He extricates himself from Johnny enough to pour some vodka into a Solo cup, digging a Redbull out from a nearby cooler and mixing the two.
Johnny lets his hand drop to Pat’s hip, leaning into the space between them a little without noticing until he glances up and catches Crawford’s amused smile. He narrows his eyes, but Crow just smiles bigger.

“Hey,” he says, leaning in so Johnny can hear him, “I’m gonna go find Ray, I’ll catch up with you crazy kids later.”

Johnny nods. “Yeah, man. Thanks for bringing the beer.”

“Make good choices!” Pat calls after him, giggling into Johnny’s shoulder as Crow moves off through the crowd. Johnny looks down at him dubiously.

“Dude, how hammered are you? I thought you said you weren’t gonna get wasted while you were hosting.”

“I’m not wasted,” Pat says, rolling his eyes even as he reattaches to Johnny’s side and holds up his drink. “Not even a little. Besides this one, I had like, one beer over an hour ago, and Fro gave me one of their weirdass Jolly Rancher shots before I came inside.” He slips a hand into the back pocket of Johnny’s jeans and grins up at him. “I’m just happy. Can’t I just be happy?”

“You can just be happy,” Johnny says. He repositions them so he can face Pat, leaning him back into the dark wood of the kitchen cabinets and ducking to catch his mouth again, kissing him deep this time until they’re pressed together and Pat’s arms are twined around him.

“Hypocrite,” Pat mutters against his mouth, and Johnny swats his hip.

“Hey, fuck you! I’m not hosting, or driving. I do what I want.”

He leans back in before Pat can come up with a retort. There’s a kind of hammering desperation in Johnny’s chest for this, a thready pulse of anxiety that’s been coursing through him all week. Like if he can just be around Pat, be close to Pat, as close as he can get, he’ll be able to sort out how he feels; to reconcile it with the seared afterimage in his mind’s eye of Pat’s hand coming up to rest against a girl’s neck, the way he’d pushed her hair back away from her face as he’d kissed her.

He pulls back and says, “You wanna go upstairs?”

Pat nods. He licks his lips and reaches for Johnny’s hand. “My room,” he says, and tugs Johnny off toward the stairway.

It’s darker on the landing, and a little quieter; the party not having spilled up this far. Pat’s hand is warm in his, clammy where their palms are pressed together, but Pat’s fingers curling strong and sure and giving Johnny’s a little squeeze as he shuts his bedroom door behind them.

“Hi,” he says, voice surprisingly loud in the quiet space after the noise downstairs. Johnny can still hear it, muffled through the walls and under his feet where the carpet seems to pulse with the stereo bass.

Johnny suddenly wishes he was less plastered. “What’s up?”

“Not a lot,” says Pat casually, with a grin that flashes white with teeth in the dark room.

He moves in, backing Johnny up against the door and kissing him again, but there’s none of the frenetic desperation from minutes before. He kisses with intent and Johnny responds, moaning into his mouth through the headrush of alcohol and nerves and want.
Stupid, says a little voice, a little itch in the back of his mind that he pushes back in favor of getting his tongue in Pat’s mouth. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Pat moans. He’s pushing for more, now; practically climbing Johnny to get more of his mouth, his neck, the slope of his jaw. Johnny hisses sharply at the hard nip Pat gives his earlobe, and Pat chases his flinch, mouthing back over the spot mumbling, “Sorry, sorry, shit, sorry.”

“I don’t care,” Johnny says, quiet under their mingled heavy breathing. And saying it, he feels something rush out, something more distracting than a little accidental sting of teeth; something that drops the floor out from under him and sets him into free fall, leaving him lighter than he’s been in days. “I don’t care,” he says again, with more conviction, and his hands slide up under Pat’s shirt. “I just want, I want-”

“Me too,” says Pat quickly, falling forward again to bury his mouth against Johnny’s neck and make him shiver when he adds, “I want you, I want everything with you.”

He lifts his head and they look at each other a moment in the dark, Johnny’s heart hammering where his chest is pressed to the equally rapid rise and fall of Pat’s. In nearly two years there have been hands and fingers and exploring mouths, and many, many pairs of uncomfortably sticky jeans, but somehow they’ve never made it all the way here.

Pat will moan, “Fingers, use your fingers, too,” while Johnny’s mouth is on his dick, making things fumbling and uncoordinated for a moment or two until they figure out a rhythm. It’s good. It’s really good, and it’s so hot Johnny usually ends up getting distracted and nearly choking himself.

This, though.

Johnny says, “Lube?” dryly, his throat feeling suddenly like thick cotton.

Pat nods. “Drawer like usual.”

“Condoms?” Johnny asks, and even in the low light he can see Pat’s cheeks darken.

“I don’t,” Pat starts, and then breaks off, looking embarrassed. “We’ve never. And I guess I just, um. Fuck.”

Johnny hesitates, and Pat frowns.

“Dude, come on. We’re both clean, right? It doesn’t matter.”

“I know,” Johnny says. “I know, but, um. I’m like, really drunk, dude. Maybe we should hold off for now.”

Johnny’s pretty sure Pat is about to kill him, provided his own dick doesn’t do it, first.

“You’re seventeen, I’m pretty sure we don’t have to worry about whiskey dick yet, man.”

“Yeah, I know.” Johnny bites his lip. He’s pretty sure keeping it up wouldn’t be an issue right now, but his thoughts are a tangled, racing jumble. Just once, he thinks, wouldn’t it be nice to be like every other dude he knows, and just let his dick make the decisions for him.

“So?” Pat prompts up, eyes narrowed dangerously.

“So wouldn’t you rather me not be shithammered the first time we do it?” Johnny says. He reaches for Pat’s hand, and for a moment, Johnny’s sure he’s about to snatch it back and start shouting.
Instead, after a moment’s hesitation, he softens.

“Yeah,” he says, quietly. He steps in, closing the space between them and leaning up to brush their mouths together again, softer this time. “Yeah, man. That’s a good idea. Just…” He trails off, meeting Johnny’s eyes with the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Can it be soon?”

“Soon,” Johnny agrees. His mind is still on spin-cycle, but mostly he just feels relieved. About what, he isn’t even entirely sure, but at least he’s bought himself more time to figure it out.

“Soon, soon,” Pat echoes, decisively, and kisses Johnny again.

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After soccer camp on Saturday morning, Patrice talks Johnny into going for lunch at the diner. Not that it takes much effort, since Johnny’s head has been pounding since he woke up, and he’s pretty sure all that’s keeping him going through the cacophony of pre-adolescent shrieking and soccer balls flying at his face is the idea of french fries.

“Are you okay?” Patrice asks. “I thought you were trying that low-carb routine until Christmas.”

“Shut up,” Johnny says, shoving the basket of fries at Patrice, even as he grabs another handful. “Just shut up and help me eat these. I am never drinking bourbon again.”

Patrice snickers, but he takes some fries for himself and squirts a dollop of ketchup onto his plate. “Yeah, you let me know how that one goes for you.”

Johnny makes a face at him, but Patrice just smiles nonchalantly and munches on a fry. His face is nearly back to normal, but Johnny can still make out the yellowing shadow of a faded bruise along his jawline if he looks for it.

“What?” says Patrice, and Johnny realizes he’s been staring. He quickly busies himself putting mustard on his sandwich and shoving most of one of the halves into his face at once.

“Nothing,” Johnny says around his bite, or rather, “Nrrphngh.”

He shrugs for effect, and Patrice raises dignified eyebrows, clearly trying not to laugh.

“I should take a picture of this and send it to Pat,” he says.

Johnny rolls his eyes, chewing and swallowing before saying, “You’ve seen him eat, right?”

Patrice snorts. “Fair enough. Hey, where is your boy, anyway? You usually want to invite him.”

“Busy,” Johnny says, quickly, and takes another large bite of his sandwich, avoiding Patrice’s eyes.

Even without seeing it, Johnny can feel the searching look Patrice gives him, a couple of fries poised halfway to his mouth.

“Everything okay with you two?” Patrice asks.

Johnny needs shittier friends. People who don’t bother trying to notice or read him, and who don’t think to ask questions.

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Johnny asks, a little more snappishly than intended. “I mean, sure. Of course.”
Patrice just shrugs. “You tell me, dude. I was just wondering, because usually by now the two of you are making googly eyes at each other, acting like I can’t tell you’re groping each other under the table.”

“Gross!” says Johnny, making a revolted face and dropping his last bite of sandwich back onto the plate. “We are nowhere near that bad.”

“You’re pretty bad,” Patrice counters, but he’s smirking again, and Johnny seriously considers kicking him under the table. “But okay, okay, sorry I asked, fucker.”

Johnny pulls the fry basket back toward himself. “I’m done sharing. Fucker.”

Patrice makes a face, and Johnny makes one back, and they both return to their food in silence for a few minutes.

“But seriously,” Patrice says, when they’ve paid the check and are heading back out to the parking lot, “stuff is cool with you?”

“Oh my god,” Johnny says, tugging on his hoodie and not waiting for Patrice as he shoves his way out the side exit. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I dunno, man,” says Patrice, completely undeterred by nearly being smacked by a door. “Your face is all...moody. Moodier than usual, I mean.”

“This is just my face,” Johnny says, narrowing his eyes. “This is just how my face looks.”

Patrice rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I know. That’s how it looks when shit’s bothering you. You get all pinched around the mouth, and your eyes start to look sharky.”

“That’s not a word,” Johnny tells him, even as he makes a concentrated effort to relax the muscles in his jaw. Shittier friends. Seriously.

“Dude, come on.” Patrice gives him a friendly shove, herding them both out of the way of a car on its way out of the parking lot. “You act the same way every time you and Pat have a fight. You don’t have to talk to me, but don’t treat me like I don’t know you.”

Johnny sighs, leaning back against the cab of his truck and frowning at the ground.

“Whatever,” he says. “Sorry.”

“You’re a dick,” Patrice tells him, “but it’s part of your charm.”

He’s halfway turned to unlock his car when Johnny can’t help himself. “Wait,” he says, and then waffles. “Uh. I mean. This is sort of a weird, personal question, and you don’t have to answer, but like…” He trails off, halfway hoping Patrice will cut him off. When he doesn’t, Johnny re-trains his gaze on the ground and asks, “Shit got weird between you and Paille after you fucked, right?”

“Oh,” says Patrice. From his expression, Johnny can tell he’s hit a nerve.

“Sorry,” he says quickly. “No, no, I’m sorry, that was a totally weird thing to ask, dude, forget I said anything.”

“Oh my god, shut up,” Patrice says. His cheeks have gone bright pink, but he meets Johnny’s eyes unwavering. “Yeah, shit got weird after that. But only because I think that’s when he realized he wasn’t really that into dick.” His eyes widen. “Oh shit, dude, Pat isn’t suddenly getting all weird
about being into dick, is he?”

_That would take him not being weird about it in the first place._ Johnny doesn’t say. “Nah,” he says, instead. “I mean, I’m pretty sure he thinks he’s bi, which, whatever. No, it’s actually sort of,” oh god, why is he still talking? “Sort of the opposite problem. Like, he wants to do it, and I…”

What. What is he even thinking? What does he want? Sure, Johnny hasn’t exactly had a ton of time to think since last night, but this shouldn’t be a complicated dilemma, right?

“You guys haven’t actually had sex yet?” Patrice looks like he’s wondering all the same things Johnny is, confusion and surprise hiking his eyebrows nearly up to his hairline.

Johnny hates this conversation. “We’ve done _stuff_,” he hisses, dropping his voice even though the parking lot is deserted aside from themselves. “Plenty of stuff. Basically everything _but._” Patrice sniggers, and Johnny glares at him. “Oh, real mature.”

“No, no,” Patrice says, trying and failing to clear the smirk off his face. “Tell me more about the _but._”

“In a second,” Johnny tells him, “I am going to start being way less polite, and way, way more descriptive, and you are going to regret ever starting this terrible, stupid conversation.”

“Remind me never to be nice to you again,” says Patrice, and he looks sufficiently revolted as he waves a hand for Johnny to finish.

“I just mean,” Johnny says, with as much dignity as he can scrape together, “what if it _does_ get weird? We’ve been sorta up and down, lately. I just don’t want to do something stupid that we both regret.”

Patrice looks at him silently for a long moment. He’s sobered, no longer watching Johnny with that infuriating smirk, and Johnny can’t decide if this feels like an improvement or not.

“I know this probably isn’t as helpful as you want it to be,” Patrice says at last, “but like, how will you know, if you don’t do it?” Johnny makes a frustrated noise, but Patrice holds up his hands in a quelling gesture before Johnny can cut him off. “Hey, you guys aren’t me and Dan. You’ve been together for _years,_ right? Fucking years, man. That’s crazy for high school. You guys are good, you’re solid, you love each other, and even if you fuck and it’s weird, what’s the worst that’ll happen? You decide it’s not for you, and you move on. Plenty of couples never get into that stuff.”

“Anyone ever tell you you read too much?” Johnny asks, and Patrice smacks his arm. “Ow!”

“Douche,” Patrice says, haughtily. “I officially give up trying to be supportive of you. Fuck right off, I hope you die old and alone, and your dick falls off from lack of use.”

Johnny snorts a laugh, in spite of himself, and Patrice grins.

“You’re the douche,” Johnny tells him. “But thanks for caring.”

Patrice bumps his fist, finally fishing keys out of his pocket and opening his car. “Any time, man. See you next week?”

“See you,” Johnny agrees.

He slides into the cab of his truck and heads for home, wishing that he really did feel more at ease.
If he’d had this conversation with Patrice a few weeks ago, he probably would. The reminders of how solid he and Pat are, of how little doubt there is that they can just figure their shit out, now serve as reminders of exactly how screwed up things are.

When Johnny’s three blocks from home, he pulls a sharp left across traffic, and comes to a screeching halt in front of a CVS.

“What the fuck,” he says, to no one in particular, and goes in.

He’s never bought condoms before. He’s thought about needing them, sure, plenty of times. But like Pat had said, it’s not like either of them have ever had sex before (that Johnny knows of). Of course they’re both clean (of course, right?). Why would they need condoms, if they’ve never fucked anyone else.

Johnny feels nauseous. For a moment, he almost turns and flees back to his truck, but instead he steels his resolve and stomps through racks of greeting cards and cold medicine, right over to the family planning aisle. He doesn’t even think to feel self conscious when the stout, beady-eyed woman behind the counter rings him up, showing the same regard for his box of Trojans that she did for the Bugles and foot cream of the guy ahead of him.

At home, he shoves the box, still in its plastic shopping bag, into the back of his nightstand drawer before stalking off to take a shower. He feels defiant; steadied, somehow, and calm in a way he hasn’t been since that night at the party, watching Pat kiss some nameless girl.
“You guys look so lame,” says Sid, turning around in the passenger seat next to Geno to look at Beau, Duper, and Glass all crammed into the back. He smirks, and dodges a jab from Glasser’s plastic saber.

“You’re the one who’s gonna look lame,” Duper tells him. “Showing up to a Halloween costume party without a costume. Maybe they won’t even let you in.”

“It’s a Causeway house,” Beau says darkly, crammed between the two upperclassmen. “They might not let any of us in.”

Geno kind of wants to agree, and maybe to just turn the car around entirely and go watch dumb scary movies in the Consol dorms like Sid had originally suggested, but Glasser is already saying, “Nah, we’ll be fine. I heard a bunch of Glendale and Madison guys are going, too, and who knows who else. It’s gonna be a rager, man.”

“Awesome,” Sid deadpans, and Geno shoots a sidelong grin at him that he returns weakly.

“Will be okay,” Geno says, more for his own good than Sid’s, who just looks resigned.

“Whatever, man. I just don’t want to stay out super late on a Wednesday.”

“We not stay super late,” Geno assures him, and then over the mingled groans of protest from the back seat, “some of us have to work in morning before school.”

The party is already in full swing by the time they get there, parking down the block behind Paul Martin’s SUV.

“Nealer says they’re all already out on the back porch,” Duper announces, checking his phone, and makes a beeline for the front door with the other four in tow.

Glass had been right, it’s definitely a costume party. They’ve already passed three unidentifiable Batmen, a Thor, and a Captain America before they get through the house, and Geno pushes out the back door past Johnny Toews wearing what looks like a Dracula cape and long-suffering expression. His boyfriend is standing next to him in street clothes, holding a beer, with a set of bite marks penciled onto his neck.

Geno snorts a quiet laugh and follows Sid and the others out onto the broad back porch, where the rest of the Consol guys have clustered around a run-down looking foosball table, shouting and heckling as they take turns. Someone hands him a beer and he ends up leaning back against the clapboard wall and nursing it slowly, content to just hang back and watch his teammates horse around.

It’s nice to see them this happy, this relaxed. Maybe they’ve still been losing games, but the last few practices have felt...different, somehow. The guys all more alert, more focused and actually playing as a team, like maybe the prolonged reality check of the losing streak has finally done its work and they can start pushing back. After all, he reminds himself, it hasn’t actually been that long since the season started. They have time.

Of course, this new buoyancy could be extremely short lived, but for now he’s just content to be cautiously optimistic, to try and help his guys shake off the weight of the last month. Even, apparently, if it means showing up to a Causeway party in costume and playing designated driver
while they all get stupid on a school night.

Even Sid seems to have forgotten himself, now manning a side of the foosball table against Paulie, with Duper’s tricornered hat perched on his head and its enormous feather bobbing jauntily as he gets more and more into the game.

After nearly an hour, Geno starts to get antsy. “Going for walk,” he says, or shouts, into Duper’s ear over the music and mingled chatter around them. “Text if anything happen.”

“Sure.” Duper claps him on the shoulder, taking a swig of his drink. “Stay out of trouble, eh?”

Geno rolls his eyes, but grins back, picking his way down the back stairs through clusters of people and abandoned cups and bottles, finally ducking around the side of the house. It’s quieter here by far, and strangely empty; the majority of people apparently opting for the brightly lit backyard, or the warmth of the house.

He only means to walk the perimeter, just stretch his legs, but as he rounds the corner into the narrow side yard between houses, he nearly runs into someone else coming the opposite direction.

“Sorry,” he says reflexively, and then he looks up and starts laughing.

“What?” says Bergeron, eyes narrowing and already on the defensive. “What the fuck.”

“No, no,” Geno tries, still chuckling but holding up his hands, signaling for peace. “Is just. Cannot go anywhere without run into each other.”

He smiles wryly, trying to look as inoffensive as possible, and after a few lingering moments, Bergeron cracks the hint of a smile in return.

“It’s pretty ironic,” he admits, shuffling his feet in the clipped grass and looking distinctly awkward. He looks up at Geno, squinting through the dark. “What are you supposed to be, anyway? A pirate?”

“Nope,” says Geno proudly, tapping the eyepatch he has pushed up onto his forehead. “Whole team is pirates. Nealer’s idea, he thinks is very funny.” He pauses, taking in Bergeron’s apparently normal clothes, but with a red cloth mask tied across his eyes. “You’re, uh…”

“Raphael,” says Bergeron, and then quickly, “uh, the Ninja Turtle? It’s like, a cartoon character thing.”

Geno raises his eyebrows. “I know what are Ninja Turtles,” he says, enjoying Bergeron’s look of surprise that the mask does nothing to hide. “Watched lots of cartoons when I move here, help with English.” He grimaces and amends, “Well. Help some.”

“You watched Ninja Turtles,” Bergeron says, and it’s not really a question, he sounds more incredulous than anything.

“Mikey always my favorite,” Geno says, casting Bergeron a significant smirk. “Sorry. Raphael always seem so serious, no fun.”

Bergeron makes a face, looking haughty, and Geno wonders for a moment if he’s completely upturned this strange, tenuous little truce they’ve apparently come to. But Bergeron just says, “My friend Marchand came as Mikey, and Seguin and Krug are Donatello and Leo.” He grimaces. “Their costumes are way better. I didn’t really want to dress up.”

“Still cool idea,” Geno says, with an easy shrug. “Kowabunga.”
For a second, Bergeron stares at him, and then he bursts out laughing, curling in on himself and finally collapsing to sit heavily on the low rock wall dividing the properties. “Oh my god,” he gasps, “sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean-- It’s just.” He looks up at Geno, tears in the corners of his eyes, and still giggling. “Sorry, that sounded really funny.”

“Whatever,” Geno says, but there’s no real venom in it. “You have funny accent, too.”

Bergeron snorts. “Do not! You can barely tell.”

“I can,” Geno informs him, grinning broader now that he’s beginning to feel like he can heckle without fear of retaliating fists. “You sound like guy from my team, Dupuis. Say ‘together’.”

“Together,” Bergeron says, and then stops and narrows his eyes, trying again and this time forcing the ‘th’ sound. “Together. Toge-- ugh. Yours is worse.”

“Is true,” Geno agrees solemnly. Bergeron is still perched on the wall, looking up at him, and he suddenly feels awkward and wrong-footed and very, very tall standing there looming over him. He asks, “I can sit?” just to be polite, and when Bergeron nods, he does.

“I just came out here to answer a phone call,” Bergeron says idly in the momentary silence. “It’s so fucking crazy in that house, I can’t hear myself think.” When Geno hums in agreement he adds, “It’s exhausting.”

Geno glances over at him. “Why you come, then?”

“It’s my best friend’s house,” Bergeron says with a wince. “He would’ve killed me. And I told his mom I’d hang out and make sure he didn’t burn the place down.”

Bergeron smiles, and even in the dark Geno can’t help noticing the way his eyes soften and his lips quirk up while he’s talking about his friend. He looks younger, somehow, and strangely sweet, for someone Geno generally associates with blunt force trauma.

Something in the pit of Geno’s stomach turns, not altogether unpleasantly, and he licks his lips, glancing down at his hands on his knees. When he looks back up, Bergeron is watching him.

He opens his mouth to say, “What?”, but at that moment someone opens a set of French windows from inside, and suddenly their secluded little patch of yard is flooded with Jay-Z’s thundering bass.

“Shit,” he says instead, and Bergeron has to lean in to hear him, frowning disapprovingly at the window.

His eyes move up to Geno’s face, and his expression changes, looking suddenly nervous. He opens his mouth to say something, but no sound ever comes, and when Geno turns to look at him, they’re nose to nose, Bergeron’s breath quick and warm against his cheek.

Geno will never be sure which of them moves first.

Bergeron’s mouth against his is tentative at first, testing; a dry brush of lips that makes the nervous little flutter in his stomach speed up like hummingbird wings, or the rush of wind through tall grass. The pause that follows lets it rise to crescendo, probably only a couple of seconds, but enough time for Geno to open his eyes and look at Bergeron, barely a couple inches away, but looking like at any moment he might turn tail and bolt.

He doesn’t bolt, though, and Geno waits another breath before he moves in again. It’s a real kiss this time, Bergeron’s hand finding his shoulder after only a moment’s hesitation, and his lips parting. The
material of his mask tickles the bridge of Geno’s nose as he tilts his head, angling for more.

This should probably feel weirder, Geno thinks, distantly. He’s never kissed another guy before, not like this, anyway, but in the end it just feels like a kiss. Nice, and soft, and a little bit wet and beer-flavored where Bergeron is apparently into using his tongue.

It’s strange, he realizes after a moment, but the nerves jangling in his belly as Bergeron sucks on his lip are astoundingly similar to the ones he’s grown to associate with flying fists and insults. Only, out of the latter context, there’s a disconcerting pleasantness about them; an electric buzz of uncertainty and newness, like the first few steps out onto fresh pond ice.

And, like pond ice, he can sense the cracks coming before the moment buckles and falls through. Bergeron pulls back abruptly, hand coming up apparently unconsciously to wipe over his mouth, eyes wide. Geno thinks it might have actually hurt less when Bergeron punched him.

Bergeron says, “Fuck.”

As pleasant as the fizzle of nerves had been a moment before, now Geno can feel the sick resurgence of defensive rage. Bergeron is already getting to his feet, looking as bristly as Geno feels, and glancing around like he’s afraid they’re being watched. They aren’t. The side yard is dark and secluded as ever; open window across from them set high enough that anyone looking out would have to crane around to see them.

Geno says, “Afraid of being seen with me?”, and for a moment Bergeron looks almost guilty, before resetting back to the familiar glare Geno is beginning to get used to having trained on himself.

“No,” Bergeron says, much too quickly. He worries at his lower lip, sucking it into his mouth as he shifts side to side. “Just. What the fuck, man. What were we doing? That was a terrible idea, you get that, right?”

“What terrible idea?” Geno asks, standing himself and taking a vindictive thrill from the way Bergeron has to look up to meet his eyes. “No ideas. Just kissing, not thinking about...about--”

“Exactly,” Bergeron cuts him off, snorting like Geno has just proved a point for him.

Geno is beginning to feel like he’s missed something here; that nagging feeling that the language barrier is making him look slow or stupid, and it’s starting to really piss him off.

“What exactly?” he snaps. “No exactly. No idea, don’t know what you talking about. Just kissing you, thinking is nice. Apparently think wrong. You say I’m a bad captain, but at least I not act like douchebag, stuck-up spoiled little kid.”

He’s not even a little surprised when Bergeron hits him. He’s maybe even kind of relieved. Bergeron gets him with a fist to the gut, and Geno doubles over, shoving him back hard and landing a flailing blow across Bergeron’s cheekbone before he’s got his wind back. This routine is starting to feel like a dance he’s slowly learning the steps to, fists and knees and elbows digging in wherever they can, Bergeron’s fingers chafing on the bare skin of Geno’s arm where he’s hanging on with a vice grip, trying to gain leverage.

“Hey!” Geno distantly registers the shout, but he’s too intent on trying to pry Bergeron’s hand off and kick him in the shins to pay much attention. “Hey, you fucking idiots, what the hell are you doing?”

It’s Johnny Toews, still in his stupid Dracula cape, but shoving it back off his shoulders and out of
the way as he tries to get between them. One of Geno’s blows meant for Bergeron connects with his ribs for his trouble as he pushes roughly at Bergeron’s shoulder.

Bergeron snarls, “Fuck off, Jon,” still glaring past his shoulder at Geno, but that just makes Toews shove him harder, finally knocking him back enough to separate the two of them.

“I should just let you stupid fuckers get kicked off your stupid fucking teams,” Toews snarls, glaring at both of them and holding his ribs where Geno’s fist had caught him. “You fucking deserve it at this point.”

Behind him, Geno notices Kane for the first time, listing drunkenly against the wall of the house and looking thoroughly entertained. He giggles, making his way over to lean against Toews, who just stands stiffly, still eyeing Geno and Bergeron like he’s just waiting for them to try and get back into it.

“Man,” says Kane, grinning at his boyfriend, “that was kinda hot.”

“Not right now, dude,” Toews grits, still watching them warily. “Seriously, what the fuck happened? Did you guys go looking for each other?”

Geno can feel his nose dripping blood, and Bergeron’s mask is skewed at a weird angle, his eye already starting to look puffy with a dark smudge of bruising underneath it. Geno spits and says, “Nothing happen. Just being stupid.”

Bergeron’s eyes narrow. He says, “Yeah. Stupid,” and turns and stomps off, ends of his skewed mask fluttering behind him.

“Ooooh,” says Kane, watching him go. “Zing.”

Geno glares at him, then at Toews, who just glares right back. Geno says, “I go now.”

“Good plan,” says Toews. “And hey,” he calls after Geno, as Geno turns to head back to the porch, “he’s being an idiot, but he’s still my friend. You screw with him again, I’ll knock your fucking teeth in.”

It takes every ounce of wavering self-control for Geno to keep walking. The thing with Bergeron is already dumb enough, he doesn’t need more trouble.

He ducks past his friends still goofing around on the back porch and finds a bathroom, shutting the door behind himself and immediately stuffing some tissue up his nose to stop the bleeding. Aside from that, though, the damage seems to be minimal; mostly they’d just been trying to tangle each other up and poke and prod, and Geno actually feels a little bad about Bergeron’s eye.

When he gets out of the bathroom, he’s careful to make sure his path is clear of Bergeron or anybody else in a Ninja Turtle mask. In retrospect, fighting with Bergeron at his best friend’s house was probably a new low for Geno’s current streak of stupid life choices, with the fact that he did it while dressed like a pirate only making it feel dumber.

“Leaving now,” Geno tells Sid, once he’s muscled his way back out to the porch. Sid nods, looking a little relieved.

“Seriously?” Glass whines, clutching a half-drunk beer. “C’mon, man, a little while longer?”

“You want to stay longer, you ask Paulie give you ride,” Geno snaps, and then immediately feels like an asshole when Glasser flinches. “I mean. Sorry,” he adds lamely. Glasser just shrugs, shaking
“Sure,” he says. Then he yells, “Hey Paulie! You got room for three more?”

“I guess,” Martin calls back, from where he’s showing Flower something on his phone. “If you don’t mind riding in the back hatch with my gear.”


“Duh,” says Geno, rolling his eyes and doing his level best to seem like he isn’t still shaking from pent up rage and frustration. “I fine, just tired. See you at school tomorrow.”

Glasser gives him one more scrutinizing stare, but apparently deems this a satisfactory response because he says, “Okay, catch you later.”

In the car, Sid sits quietly for a long time. Geno is halfway sure he’s fallen asleep when he finally says, “Run into that Bergeron kid again?”

Geno glances up sharply, worrying his lip between his teeth a moment before nodding. “How you know?”

“There’s blood on your collar,” Sid says simply.

“Shit,” says Geno. In his periphery, he can see the corners of Sid’s mouth turn down in a tense little frown.

“I won’t say anything, don’t worry,” Sid says. “But man, you’ve got to stop letting this happen. I know,” he pauses, jaw set like he’s chewing over the words before he says them, “I know this season’s been hard so far. And I know you, you do that cheerful pep-talk act for the guys, but I know you’ve gotta be freaked out right now, I get it. Just…don’t sabotage it, okay? You’re a good captain, and it would really suck if you got kicked off the team for something this lame.”

Geno stares at him, stopped at a light and not at all sure what to say. “Thanks,” he tries finally, quietly. “That mean a lot.”

“I mean it,” says Sid. “I don’t know why he’s doing it, but you’re not stupid, man. Even if he’s being a bag of dicks, you’ve got to let it slide and just walk away.”

“You think I don’t tell myself same thing?” Geno asks, temper flaring even under his gratitude for Sid’s candor. “I don’t want to lose C, I don’t want to be kicked off team.”

“Then why the hell do you keep fighting with him?” Sid asks, and even though Geno isn’t looking at him, he can feel Sid’s eyes trained on his face.

For a moment, Geno almost considers telling Sid about the kiss. His stomach still knots up at the memory, though; a mixture of guilt and excitement and anger and, above all, shock and confusion, all churning through him and making it impossible to find the words. Instead, he finally just says, “Don’t think we know how to do anything else at this point.”

Sid gives a dry little laugh. “No shit.”
November: Patrice

Chapter Notes

WHOOPS SORRY I have a good excuse for turning in late work, I promise.

It takes Patrice hours to fall asleep, still wound tight and buzzing with nervous energy. The persistent throbbing in his swollen eye doesn’t help, and the low, steady pulse is uncomfortably hot, even after he’s laid on his back with a bag of frozen peas over half his face for a few minutes.

He must eventually drift off, though, because the next thing he knows is the persistent chirp of his phone alarm next to his head. Hitting snooze, Patrice groans and curls tighter around his pillow, but a moment later there’s a knock on his bedroom door.

“Patrice,” calls his mother’s voice, accompanied by another rap of knuckles. She pauses, and then opens the door, poking her head in. “Patrice, on your way home today I need you to-- Is that a black eye?”

He tugs the pillow over his face, but she’s too quick for him, pushing it back and frowning down at him with an uncharacteristically sharp expression. “It’s not as bad as it looks,” he tries, with an attempt at a disarming smile, to little effect.

“Fighting again.” she says shrewdly. “Off the ice, at Tyler’s party?”

Patrice glances away self-consciously and her frown deepens, like he’s just confirmed her suspicions. He mumbles, “It’s not going to happen again, don’t worry.”

His mother sighs, reaching down and pushing the hair back off his forehead to get a better look. “Of course I worry,” she says. “You come home looking like this, what kind of parent would I be, not to worry?”

He winces, unable to meet her eyes. It would be so much easier if she just shouted or something, and he’s pretty sure she knows it. “I’m sorry,” he says, “really. It was stupid, I know, and it won’t happen again, I promise, Mom.”

“Alright,” she says, after a moment’s pause. “This just isn’t like you, Patrice. On the ice I can kind of understand, even if I don’t have to like it, but fighting at parties is something different. “ She straightens, giving his shoulder a final pat. “When you’re ready, come on downstairs. Dad should be there when we talk about consequences.”

Patrice is pretty sure nothing either of his parents, with their relatively limited experience in doling out punishment, could cook up anything that would make him feel worse than he does right now. After she disappears down the hall, he gets up and shuffles through his morning routine of showering, dressing, and collecting everything he needs for school. He avoids his reflection in the bathroom mirror, toying for a moment with the idea of sneaking into his parents’ room and trying to use some of his mom’s concealer on his eye, but in the end he just tries to brush his hair as low over his face as he can, tugging up the hood of his jacket, and plodding downstairs.

His brother, Guillaume, had gotten in trouble all the time in high school, mostly small stuff, but he’d
been grounded a couple of times. He’d had his laptop and car taken away for a whole month once, the winter he got suspended for drinking on campus.

Patrice has never gotten in trouble like that, and he wonders where this current infraction will fit, in the scheme of things. He’s never even had a curfew, but then again, he’s also never come home wasted (that his parents know of), or even gotten so much as a tardy slip from school. Knowing his parents, “consequences” might mean staying in and watching a nature documentary with them, or maybe doing the dishes for a week, or clearing out the rain gutters.

His dad is sitting at the kitchen table, typing on his laptop, and he’s not quick enough to cover his wince when he sees Patrice.

“Hey, Dad,” Patrice says, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and grimacing when the heel of his palm rubs over the bruise. He drops his hands self-consciously, fiddling with the strap of his backpack.

His dad doesn’t comment, but he doesn’t look very stern, either. Patrice glances up just in time to see the fleeting look of sympathy that crosses his face. ”Get some breakfast,” he says, shutting his laptop and tugging out the chair next to him, “and come have a seat.”

Patrice’s mom comes in a minute later as he’s pouring himself some cereal, rummaging around for her keys in the dish on the counter, tossing them into her purse before following him to the table.

“Patrice,” his father starts, and he looks so tired, suddenly. Patrice could have happily gone his whole life without seeing that expression trained on himself. “You’ve never gotten into fights like this before, son. What’s going on? This isn’t like you.”

“Um,” says Patrice, toying disinterestedly with the spoon in his Raisin Bran. His parents both look at him, but he can’t figure out what to say, and the silence stretches on until his mother finally cuts in.

“We know how serious you are about hockey,” she says, and he nods mutely, glancing up at her. “But if it’s going to start resulting in things like this--”

“It’s not,” he says quickly, cutting her off before she can say the words he’s been terrified to hear since that first fight with Malkin on the ice. “It’s not, it’s--it’s not a hockey thing, I swear. It was just a stupid thing at Segs’ party, and stuff got out of hand for a minute.”

He wills them desperately to believe this, and even though it isn’t all entirely a lie, he still feels a little sick with himself. He’s never needed to lie to his parents. They’ve always trusted him and, as Segs thinks it’s hilarious to point out, Patrice has never given them reason not to.

Now is apparently no different. His parents glance at each other, both still frowning, but finally his dad says, “We just want you to talk to us.”

He reaches out and gives Patrice’s shoulder a little squeeze, and for a frantic moment Patrice wants to latch on like he’s a little kid again; cling to his parents and tell them everything, and just let the grownups fix it.

Instead, he forces himself to say, “Yeah,” and manages what he hopes is a halfway convincing smile. “I know, Dad. Thanks. There’s nothing really to talk about, though. Just some guy who’s been driving me nuts. He’s a jerk, I don’t know. It’s not a big deal.”

The way their eyes focus on him makes his stomach seize. Patrice is used to scrutiny, is ordinarily so good at deflecting it, but all of his skills are escaping him now.

“What guy?” his mom asks, looking like she wants to argue his last statement, but taking a sip of her
coffee instead, and leaning closer to his dad. “You’ve never mentioned anyone specific to us.”

If there were ever a time to book it, that time would be now.

“I really don’t want to talk about this,” Patrice says. He takes a deep breath, but his voice still catches awkwardly in his throat. “It’s stupid. It was stupid. And now it’s really, really over.”

“Buddy, if someone’s... bullying you, at school,” his dad starts, and Patrice doesn’t mean to laugh, but it bursts out of him anyway before he can stop it. He’s never been bullied a day in his life.

“Yeah, okay,” his dad agrees. “But you’d tell us if it was something like that, right? You can always talk to us. That’s all we want.”

“That, and to keep you from messing up your pretty face,” his mom adds with a teasing smile. She pinches his cheek, just slightly too hard, and Patrice laughs too, before shoving her hand away.

“Mom, I’m not pretty. God. Shut up.” She tweaks his cheek again, and then shoves at his shoulder to get him moving.

“Finish your breakfast, it’s getting late,” she says, standing up herself and collecting her purse. “I need you to pick up the dry cleaning on your way home today, okay? Your dad and I won’t be finished with work before the place closes.”

“And,” his dad interjects, before Patrice can respond, “you’re staying in this weekend. I don’t care if Causeway wins sixteen to zip on Friday night, you’re coming home with us and watching _Blue Planet._” He casts Patrice a triumphant smirk.

Surprise.

Patrice tries not to grin back, taking a big bite of soggy cereal instead, and nodding. Now he has a ready-made excuse not to go out anywhere he might run into Malkin again, and Segs and Marchy will just have to deal, or go out without him.

--

School is predictably awkward. Patrice is at least somewhat familiar with showing up after rough games sporting various injuries and abrasions, but apparently multiple shiners in the space of a month or so are worthy of a little more attention.

His homeroom teacher does a double take when he walks in, pausing awkwardly in the middle of writing the morning’s assignment up on the board, and the group of girls who ordinarily sit in front of him gossiping keep turning around to stare unflatteringly at his face. This is all relatively inconsequential, though, compared to his worry about what he’s supposed to tell Coach and the team.

By the time practice rolls around, Patrice’s nerves are a jangling mess, and he jumps when the final bell rings. He dawdles a little in collecting his things and finally heads for the rink, feeling more and more with every step like there are lead weights strapped to his feet. He’s thought about it all day, what to tell Coach, and the best he can come up with is the incredibly flimsy-sounding, “It was a misunderstanding,” line.

Predictably, Coach takes one look at him and calls, “Bergeron. Can I talk to you in my office for a minute?”

His stomach plummets, but he puts down the stick tape he’d been fiddling with and stands. From the
corner of his eye, he sees a few of the guys cast furtive, nervous glances his way, and nobody’s said much of anything in the few minutes they’ve all been getting their gear on, but that only makes him feel worse. Like they’re all just bracing for the inevitable.

It’s Segs who breaks the silence, jumping up after Patrice and actually getting in front of him, like a human shield.

“Hey,” he says, quickly and a little too loudly, “Coach, if this is about Berg’s face?” He pauses awkwardly until Coach nods. The guys are all really staring now; not even bothering to pretend otherwise.

Patrice shoots Segs a sharp look, trying to catch his eye and get him to just go sit down and not drag this out any further. Coach seems to have the same idea, because he says, “Seguin, go get your gear on,” but Segs keeps pressing.

“No, about that,” he says, loudly, so Patrice closes his mouth helplessly and just stands there with nails digging into his palms. “It’s not what you think. We were just horsing around at my party last night, goofing off, and I accidentally clipped Bergy here.” He grins, big and toothy. “It’s not his fault his reflexes are shit.”

Coach looks back and forth between the two of them while Patrice stares stupidly at Segs, letting the silence stretch on far too long, even as he can feel the credibility of Segs’ story dwindling the longer he stays quiet.

“Um,” he says, when Segs shoots him a prompting look, but before he can blunder on, Marchy cuts in.

“I saw them,” he says, grinning and leaning back lazily against his cubby where he’s already got his full gear on. “It was dumb as hell.”

“So,” Coach says slowly, addressing Patrice and still looking distinctly uncomfortable with having this conversation in full view of the whole team. “You didn’t get that black eye in an actual fight?”

Segs is staring at him, Patrice can feel his eyes practically boring holes into the side of his face. He shakes his head. “Nope. It was an accident, like he said. We were just being dumb.”

“Super dumb,” agrees Marchy.

Coach looks at the three of them, and Patrice can practically hear the cogs turning in his head. On the one hand, they’re pretty clearly full of shit; on the other, trying to disprove this story will open a whole big can of worms and consequences in the midst of Causeway’s first early-season winning streak in nearly a decade.

For a long, tenuous moment, Coach just stares, and Patrice is afraid to move, or think, or even look at the other guys for fear any of their faces might give them away. But finally Coach just sighs and says, “Dumb is right. Okay, fine, but don’t let this happen again. This team doesn’t need any more of a reputation than it’s already got.”

He gives Patrice a long, final look, before turning and disappearing back into his office. Patrice breathes out a shaky breath he hadn’t even realized he’d been holding, and turns to look at Segs.

“Uh, thanks,” he says quietly. Behind them, the rest of the guys have resumed dressing out, now that the show is apparently over. “Shit.”

“For what?” Segs says casually, throwing Patrice another one of those wolfish grins before heading...
back over to finish getting dressed himself. “I was just telling the truth. You know I got your back, bro.”

Across the room, Marchy smirks.

For a fleeting, insane second, Patrice wants to hug them both. Instead, he just plunks back down on the bench and starts strapping his gear on. He feels infinitely lighter, suddenly, and a little bit giddy, ducking his head down to tie his skates so nobody can see the flush in his cheeks and his stupid, relieved smile.

After practice, Marchy catches up to Patrice on his way out to the parking lot, Segs trailing along behind, still stuffing the last of his things into his gear bag.

“Hey,” Marchy says, falling into step and grinning sidelong at him. “Wanna hang out tonight?”

Patrice takes a moment to consider, tossing his school bag into the backseat. “I have to get my mom’s dry cleaning on the way home, but sure, if you guys want to meet me at my house, it’ll just take a couple extra minutes. Um.” He pauses, biting his lip. “I mean, I dunno how long my parents’ll let you guys hang, once they’re back, though. They’re not super thrilled with me right now.”

“What’d you tell them?” Segs asks.

Patrice grimaces. “The truth, more or less,” he says, squinting out into the late afternoon sun. It’s getting dark earlier now, the tall school buildings to the west of the parking lot already silhouetted against the orange blaze in a chilly, cloudless sky.

Marchy grins, elbowing Patrice in the ribs. “The golden boy, getting into trouble! Took you fucking long enough, man. Welcome to the brotherhood, it’s good to finally have you.”

“Oh, shut up,” says Patrice, but he smiles a little in spite of himself, while Segs snickers. “Okay, I’ve gotta take off before the place closes. See you guys in a few.”

He makes it to the dry cleaner’s just in time, laying the bags carefully over the passenger seat and heading for home as the last rays of sunlight disappear behind him in the rearview mirror. Sure enough, Segs and Marchy are already parked and waiting for him by the curb when he gets home, and they grab some sodas from the fridge before heading up to Patrice’s room.

Patrice means to get his school stuff out and finish up his pre-calc homework, but they all end up predictably sprawled on his floor, playing NHL ’13 instead. It’s quiet and companionable, apart from occasional chirping, and after a moment Patrice clears his throat and says, “So um. Thanks. For earlier at practice, I mean.”

On screen, Segs’ guy gets pasted to the boards and they all groan. “What,” he says, raising eyebrows at Patrice, “you thought we were gonna hang you out to dry? Fuck off.”

Marchy snorts derisively. “You saw Coach. He didn’t wanna come down on you to begin with.”

“Still,” says Patrice. He shrugs, still working the controller. “Thanks for covering my stupid ass.”

“No worries,” says Segs, with a bright smile. “Now you just owe us forever.”

“Yup,” agrees Marchy. “And maybe as your first order of payback you could go a week without getting your face beat in by a giant Russian. We know it’s gonna be hard for you, but you never fucking learn, PBerg.”
“Learn what?” Segs asks. He turns to look at Patrice skeptically. “It’s his fault, right? He keeps starting it.”

“Um,” says Patrice, but Marchy just laughs, saving him the trouble of trying to think up a response that doesn’t end with admitting just how mutual his altercations with Malkin have been.

“Bergy’s hiding some piece on the side,” Marchy says knowingly, pausing the game in favor of leering over at Patrice, his eyebrows making a crazy squiggle across his forehead. “Big Russian Malkin’s fucking her too. That’s why they keep roughing each other up.”

It’s not true, obviously, but Patrice feels his face heating at the thought of it, of Malkin’s hands on him. Or Malkin’s hands rough on somebody else, maybe. Pushy and aggressive they way he gets with Patrice, but less angry and more purposeful; using all that size and force for something other than hitting and shoving.

The sudden and overwhelming surge of humiliating jealousy that hits him takes Patrice entirely by surprise.

He closes his eyes, willing the blush away. If he’s lucky, they won’t notice, but his luck has all but abandoned him lately, because Marchy laughs again, reaching over to poke at his cheek.

“You see what I’m saying, man? Look at this face. He’s been keeping shit from us.”

Patrice rolls his eyes, swatting Marchy’s hand away and doing his level best to look long-suffering. “I am not. There’s no girl on the side, guys. Malkin’s just...he’s an asshole. Let it go.”

“He’s an asshole,” Marchy says, mimicking his accent. “Let it go.”

Segs starts giggling, too. “Man, we’d maybe let it go if you would. But you’re the one who apparently likes looking like you ran face first into a door knob all the damn time.”

“I need new friends,” Patrice says, trying not to smile at the annoyed noises they both make.

Marchy swats at him again, saying, “Whatever, Bergy. As if Captain Dead-Eyes gets you like we get you.”

“Captain Dead-Eyes gets dick,” Segs adds, giggling. “If you don’t need dick, I wouldn’t look at that dude for too much advice.”

Patrice can feel his face flaming all over again. “I don’t need dick,” he says, way more emphatic than he needs to be. “I still need new friends, though. You guys are useless.”

“Your face is useless,” Marchy says, grinning easily and unpausing the game.

They end up wasting another hour or so playing until Patrice’s parents get home. He hears them puttering around downstairs, and what sounds like bags of groceries being put away. Eventually, his mom wanders upstairs, glancing in at them.

“Homework?” she asks.

“Almost done,” he says, not taking his eyes off the game. “I finished most of it in study hall and I can do the rest before bed.”

His mother makes an approving noise, while next to Patrice, Segs and Marchy make identical revolted faces at him with their backs to her.
“Tyler?” she asks Segs. “Does your mom know you’re out here today?”

Segs just shrugs. “I’m not sure if she does, Mrs. B, but I’m going to my dad’s for dinner later, and he knows where I am.”

He smiles over his shoulder at her, bright and big, and even Patrice’s mother softens a little, before rolling her eyes.

“Don’t try that sweet talk on me, Tyler Seguin, I’ve been wise to you for years. Give your dad a call and tell him you’ll be ready for a ride in an hour. My son has homework to finish.”


“And I thought your father and I already told you,” she says, looking sternly down her nose at him, “that you’re on lockdown through this weekend.”

“You guys just said I couldn’t go out!” Patrice protests, over Segs and Marchy’s chorused Oooooohs.

His mother snorts. “You’re good, but you’re not that good, kiddo. Don’t push my limits. And you guys,” she turns on Segs and Marchy, who both immediately sit up straighter, watching her. “I never thought I’d say this, but try and keep him out of trouble? Unless you like visiting him under house arrest.”

“Will do,” says Marchy, and Segs throws her a grinning salute.

“You got it, Mrs. B. And I’ll call my dad right now.”

She raises her eyebrows. “Glad to hear it. Let me know if you boys need anything else, I’ll be right downstairs.”

“We will, Mom!” Patrice calls out, but she’s already disappeared back down the hall.

As soon as she’s gone, Marchy elbows Segs hard, hissing, “Yo, you flirting with Mrs. B now, man? You still into older pussy?”

He’s laughing as he says it, and the only thing that stops Patrice from punching him right in the stomach is the stark horror on Segs’ face.

“What the fuck? No!” he squeaks, the tops of his cheeks burning bright.

Marchy’s laughing so hard that he’s not even making noise anymore.

“Oh my god,” he wheezes out. “Look at your fucking face.”

Segs rubs at his cheek, drawing his legs up and making himself small. Smaller, for someone composed almost entirely of long, gangly limbs. He’s not smiling anymore.

“Dude, Bergy’s mom is family. She’s like my fucking aunt or something, man. Don’t say shit like that, it’s gross!”

Marchy hasn’t stopped laughing. If possible, he laughs even harder.

“I really wish you’d stop talking like that about my mother,” Patrice grumbles, smacking Marchy upside the head. Marchy yelps, and wipes at his eyes, unrepentant.
“I’m not into ‘older pussy’,” Segs mumbles, still looking scandalized. He makes air quotes. Patrice has to bite down hard on his lip to keep from losing his shit all over again. “That was like, one fucking time at camp, she wasn’t that much older. Forget about it.”

“It was way more than one time,” Marchy says, turning over on his back, but still using Patrice’s thigh as a headrest. “The way you went on about it all summer? How many times was it, PBerg, 20? 30?”

“Somewhere up there,” Patrice agrees, but he’s stopped laughing, and eventually, Marchy’s giggles peter out too. Segs is looking defiant.

“I was just being nice,” Segs says petulantly, punching Marchy’s thigh, hard. “Mrs. B is awesome, so sue me, I like when she’s not pissed at me. You’re a dick.”

“Yep,” Marchy agrees, looking up and grinning at both of them. “Now, shut up. I want to kick the hell of this game before Bergy here turns into a pumpkin.”
November: Johnny

In home ec on Monday morning, Johnny gets a text from Pat, phone vibrating in the back pocket of his pants.

_Bathroom break?_

Johnny rolls his eyes, holding his phone out of sight under the prep table he’s sharing with Ben Smith and Bollig as Mr. Kitchen walks by, surveying everyone’s progress on their soufflés.

“You’re blushing,” Smith singsongs under his breath, and Bollig snickers, earning them both dirty looks from Johnny before he texts back.

_Gimme 2 mins._

He stuffs his phone back into his pocket. “Hey,” he says, with as much dignity as he can muster, with both of them still leering over the table at him. “Benny, can you take mine out when the timer dings?”

“Sure,” says Smith, smiling sweetly. “Got some important business there, Cap?”

“Shut up,” Johnny hisses, and raises his hand for the bathroom pass as Bollig makes kissy faces at him.

Johnny and Pat have a system. It started out in ninth grade photography, when they’d just begun dating and everything felt new and kind of frenzied. Like any moment together could be there last, and needed to be capitalized upon however possible. In retrospect, Johnny is completely baffled by how long it took anyone to find out about them.

The now abandoned photo lab with its cluttered yet lockable storage closet holds a lot of memories of those first few frantic months. It also holds an enormous mess of disorganized, outdated arts and crafts supplies, probably since he and Pat were always the first to volunteer when their teacher had needed someone to clean it up, and nobody’s used the room since.

Johnny slips in and shuts the door behind himself, groping for the pull-chain on the overhead light. He’s only waiting a minute or two before the door opens again and Pat slips in after him, cheeks flushed and forehead sweaty.

“Did you run here?” Johnny whispers, laughing. It’s doubtful anyone would hear them, even if they wandered into the abandoned classroom, but anything seems loud in this cramped, forgotten little space.

“Yeah,” says Pat, eyes bright as he crowds in close. His hands find Johnny’s back pockets, and settle there. “I don’t have that long. We’re watching _Last of the Mohicans_ in history and I’ve already seen it, but I think Mr. Hossa wants us to do a worksheet on it before the bell.”

“We’re doing soufflés in home ec,” Johnny says. “I left Benny in charge of mine.”

“Sweet,” Pat says, stepping into Johnny’s space. “Then let’s do this thing.”

Johnny laughs again, and leans down to kiss Pat, arms wrapping tight around him until they overbalance and fall into a shelf of supplies with a crash.
“Shit,” Pat giggles. “Shit, shit, that was loud.”

Johnny ignores this in favor of kissing him again. “Did you mean what you said before?” he asks, voice muffled where his mouth is pressed to Pat’s neck. “About wanting to try fucking for real?”

It seems to take Pat a moment to remember what he’s talking about, distracted by the way Johnny’s hand is rubbing over the outline of his half-hard dick through his pants. “Like. Dick in ass fucking, yeah. I wanna, I mean. I do, if you do.”


Pat’s eyes are glassy when Johnny looks up at him, color dark in his cheeks. “You really meant that?” he says, and his voice is more ragged than Johnny’s ever heard it; low and harsh and maybe even desperate. Johnny’s pretty sure he’s never made anyone feel desperate for anything at all before.

He pulls back to look at Pat, at his stupid hair and his eyes all weird greeny-blue under the unforgiving light of the bare bulb above them. At the way his mouth is bitten red, lips thin like he’s actually worried about Johnny’s response.

Johnny breaths in, and then out again. “I really, really mean it,” he says quietly. “I keep thinking about it. I wanna try.” He closes his eyes, tipping their heads together.

“I love you,” Pete says, fingers clinging tight to Johnny's shoulder. “I really, really love you.”

Johnny clings back, arms around him and holding on tight, like those first months back in ninth grade. Before anybody knew besides them, before they’d turned the team and their lives upside down. Before shit had gotten so fucking complicated.

“Do you ever wish we hadn’t told?” he blurts, and Pat frowns, pulling back a little to look at him. “Huh?”

“He’s just wondering if we should have kept it a secret,” Johnny lies. “Sometimes, you know? Like, before we got turned into some kind of issue that everybody had to talk about and whatever.”

“For fuck’s sake, Jon,” Pat says. The flush has drained from his cheeks, and now he just looks tired and annoyed. “For the last goddamn time, that’s not why they gave you the C. They gave it to you because you’re a good leader and shit, not to make some kind of fucked up statement. I thought you got over freaking out about that last year.”

“I did,” Johnny lies. “That’s not what I was talking about. I mean us, dude. I guess I just miss us being only us, when we didn’t have to worry about what everybody else was saying.”

Pat snorts. “Again, man, that’s all you. Fuck ‘em, right? Who cares what anyone else is saying about us. They fucking wish they were this great.”

He moves back in, kissing Johnny hard, hands cupping Johnny’s face and holding him there. He kisses down Johnny’s neck, cutting the bullshit and groping for the button on Johnny’s fly.

“How much more time do you have?” Johnny asks, but Pat cuts him off.
“Tell me what you want,” he says, even as he’s groping past Johnny’s underwear to get a hand on his dick, giving him a couple experimental strokes. Johnny’s rock hard, despite their little conversational detour.

“Um,” says Johnny, “this is good.”

“Cool,” says Pat. “Wow, were you just sitting there in class with this wood? I mean, I guess Mr. Kitch is kinda hot, but--”

“Shut up,” breaths Johnny. “Gross. God, do you ever shut up?”

Pat huffs. “Hypocrite. I guess there are other things I could do with my mouth,” he says, and then yelps as Johnny’s teeth dig into his shoulder. “Ow! You wanna come or not?”


“You like it,” Pat tells him, and Johnny hums in agreement. “I want,” he says, getting a nice rhythm going again and kissing Johnny’s cheek once before breathing into his ear, “shit, Johnny, I wanna ride you. I wanna get so good at just fingering myself open and feeling you under me -- in me, shit -- you’re so big, it’s gonna take practice, but I don’t care. What do you think? You’re always the one telling me I need to spend less time dicking around and more time working on my form.”

Johnny comes all over Pat’s hand.

"God, that was hot," he hears himself mumble, and instantly feels his cheeks heat, even if it's true. Pat grins.

Johnny feels his chest swell with it, overwhelmed. It's hysterical and ecstatic and so, so temporary that he clutches at it, like maybe if he memorizes this this exactly this, it'll stay forever.

“Pass me those paper towels,” Pat says, and Johnny forces himself back to earth, to the present, groping around for the stack of paper towel refills on the shelf behind them. “Someday,” he adds, conversationally, as he wipes his hand off, “I’m gonna stop feeling weird about wanting to lick your spunk off my fingers.”

Johnny rubs him off through his pants out of pure spite, and only about halfway on purpose.

“Did you just come in your pants?” he asks, after Pat gives a short, strangled sort of hiccup, and turns bright pink.

“I. Yeah, fuck off.”

It should be funny. Any other time Johnny’d probably laugh, or chirp him, or something. But somehow, this time, all he can seem to manage is, “Woah.”

“Woah?” Pat is still pink to the tips of his ears, but he suddenly looks criminally smug for someone with a pair of a pair of boxer briefs full of cooling jizz.

Johnny kisses him, quick and sweet. “Yeah, woah. Now c’mon, let’s get back to class. Seriously, Mr. Hossa’s gonna kill you.” He gives Pat a little push in the direction of the door.

“Dude, like I fucking care,” Pat laughs, and Johnny narrows his eyes.

“You SHOULD care.”

Pat snorts. “O captain, my captain,” he grumbles.
“God, shut up,” Johnny says, but he gives Pat one more quick kiss before shoving him out the door.

That’s the drill, Johnny will follow exactly a minute later. He times it with his phone.
Midway through November, Geno’s mom recruits him and a few guys from school to come over and clean out the garage.

“I want to be able to park in there this winter,” she says in Russian around a mouthful of hairpins, tucking her hair up in preparation for the restaurant. “The station wagon is getting too old to leave it outside in cold weather.”

“Sid, Tanner, and Flower said they would help out,” Geno tells her, stirring some sugar into his coffee and taking an experimental sip. “They’ll be over in about half an hour.”

His mother smiles fondly and leans up to kiss his cheek. “Wonderful,” she says. “Tell them I’ll bring back dinner, so they’re welcome to stay. And I’m having Talia drop your brother off when the breakfast rush is over so he can help out, too.”

She putsters around for a few more minutes, collecting her pocketbook and tugging on her coat, giving his arm a final pat before heading out the door. Geno sips his coffee and idly checks his phone, and a few minutes later he hears a car pulling into the driveway and a collection of slamming doors and loud voices.

“Whose car?” he asks, coming out to meet them on the porch and glancing at Flower, who’s twirling a set of keys around one finger. “When you get car?”

“My dad’s,” Flower says, shrugging. “He’s gone for the week, and he dropped it off at school yesterday so I can use it to go shopping and stuff.”

“And stuff,” Glasser mutters, smirking.

Flower elbows him. “Act right and maybe I’ll take you to a strip club.”

“Sure,” Sid deadpans, raising his eyebrows at Geno and clearly trying not to smile. “You two could definitely get into a strip club.”

“Just for that, you’re not invited, Killjoy,” Flower tells him, patting Sid on the head and following Geno inside with the other two in tow. “You can come, though, G. You totally look eighteen. Hey, is there more coffee?”

Geno avoids responding to the invitation in favor of finding mugs for everyone and digging the half and half out of the back of the fridge for Sid. He says, “Mom say she sending Denis home from restaurant soon, so he be here to help, too. Also say she bring dinner.”

“Awesome,” says Glasser, eyes lighting up. “Stuff from the restaurant?”

Geno shrugs. “Probably. Or maybe pizza.”

“What does she want us to do, anyway?” Sid asks.

Geno picks up the list his mother left and hands it over. “Lots of boxes, need to be organized. Take lots of things to Goodwill, clean out trash. Make room for car.”

“This is in Cyrillic,” Sid says, handing back the list, “but okay.”

They finish their coffee and make their way out the back door, stopping dead when Geno flips the

“Are we being paid for this?” asks Flower, and then, “Ouch, dick,” as Sid knocks him into the doorway, frowning.

“Is big mess,” Geno apologizes. “You don’t have to stay all day.”

“Nah,” says Glasser, starting to pick his way through the stacks of boxes, piles of old magazines and newspapers, and assorted unused furniture. “It’s not so bad. Where should we start?”

“Start from outside, work in,” Geno decides after a moment’s consideration. He hits the button to open the door, and they all work their way through the mess, starting to drag the first big cardboard boxes out into the driveway to sort through.

It isn’t actually unpleasant, working in the crisp autumn sunlight and organizing things into piles to keep, throw out, or give away. Flower hooks up his iPod to the stereo in his dad’s car, and by the time Denis shows up, they’ve already made decent progress.

“Hey,” Flower calls, from behind some plastic packing crates and an old rocking chair missing its upholstery. “You guys, can I keep this?”

He reemerges from the depths, and both Geno and Denis burst out laughing. “Dude,” says Denis, “no. That’s our dad’s hat thingy. He did traditional folk dancing before we moved.”

“You can’t pull off fur, anyway,” says Glasser, swiping it off his head and trying to put it on Sid, instead. Sid ducks out of reach just in time and Geno takes it from him and tosses it into a box already containing a bunch of winterwear.

“Nobody can pull off,” he says, matter of factly, resuming his sorting through a stack of old magazines. “Even Dad look silly, we all just too nice to say anything.”

“Where is your dad?” asks Glasser, starting to fold a pile of old clothes headed for the donation bin. “Isn’t he a pilot or something?”

Denis makes a face. “Nah, he works for the airlines, though. He’s on some board of advisors, and they’re trying to expand or something, so he’s been going back to Russia a lot to work on that.”

“Oh,” says Glasser, biting his lip and glancing between the two of them. “Man, that sucks, huh?”

Geno can feel the look Sid is giving him without seeing it, but he just shrugs and says, “Is not great, but we make it work.”

Denis snorts derisively as he passes with an armful of newspapers, but the other guys are already distracted by an old remote control monster truck, and Geno is pretty sure that he’s the only one who heard it. He drops the last few issues of decade-old *Sports Illustrated* into the recycling bin, and straightens up.

“Lunch?” asks Sid, catching his eye, and Geno nods.

“Keep going,” he tells Flower and Glasser, who have given up trying to get the remote control truck to work and are investigating a tub of Matchbox cars, instead. “Me and Sid go inside and make sandwiches, be right back. Denis is supervisor now.”
Flower makes an indignant noise in his throat and Denis grins at him.

“I’ll make sure they don’t run off with any more of Dad’s costume,” Denis assures him. “Although, I think Tanner would look great in the puffy pants.”

Inside, Sid waits until they’ve got an assembly line of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches going before he asks, “So your parents still aren’t getting along?”

Geno glances up at him, shrugging. “Get along okay, because Dad so far away usually. But don’t get along, because Dad keeps going away.” He slaps the two sides of a sandwich together and drops it onto the plate with a huff.

“That sucks, man,” Sid says simply, and Geno can’t help but give him a little smile, even though it feels strained at the edges.

“Used to it,” he says, not like that makes it any better, but it’s true. “Denis more upset than me, I think. He fight with Dad lots when Dad come home, and fight with Mom, say she should standing up for herself more. But she says she’s fine, happy with restaurant, happy with life here.”

Sid hums in acknowledgment, taking much longer than necessary to smooth peanut butter over a slice of bread before saying, “You think she is?”

“I think anybody try to take her away from restaurant, they have other thing coming,” Geno says darkly, with a little smirk.

“But I mean,” says Sid, pausing and straightening up to look at Geno, a frown creasing his forehead, “that’s not even the issue, right? Like, your dad wouldn’t make you guys move back to Russia, would he?”

Geno takes a moment too long to answer, and the panicked expression that flickers across Sid’s face is simultaneously hilarious, and also makes Geno want to hug him. He doesn’t though; just drops the last sandwich onto their stack and says, “He want us to, but he get out-voted. Mama say good luck, he not boss, we all happy here.”

“Good,” says Sid, letting his breath out in a whoosh like he’d been holding it in. “Dude, it would suck to lose you from the team.”

“Oh,” says Geno knowingly. “From the team. That all that matter?”

Sid rolls his eyes disparagingly, but he says, “Shut up. You know I’d miss you like crazy.”

Geno does hug him then, yanking him in and giving his shoulders a tight, comfortable squeeze. When they pull apart, Sid looks ruffled, but he’s smiling.

“Come on,” he says, grabbing the plate and beckoning Sid to follow. “We go back out now before guys try to take my baby brother to see girls dancing in underwear.”

Everyone is still working when they get back outside, although Flower hastily drops a magazine back into the recycling with a sheepish grin. They all grab sandwiches and find seats, and Geno tips his head back, enjoying what is probably some of the last warm midday sun they’ll have this year.

“Party next weekend up in MTL,” Glasser says, casually enough but with a significant glance at Geno. “You feel like driving?”

Geno shakes his head, midway through a big bite of sandwich, and has to chew and swallow before
he can say, “Sorry, don’t think so. Probably have to work.”

“No, I don’t think you--” Denis cuts off at a look from Geno, but Flower’s eyebrows are already raised, looking between the two of them.

“Uh,” he says. “What’s up?”

Geno picks at the crust on his sandwich, keeping his eyes averted from Flower’s affronted look and Glasser’s concerned little frown. “Not in mood for party,” he says finally. “So many lately, thinking maybe need break.”

“You mean,” says Glasser, with a tone of dawning comprehension, “you need a break from running into French-Canadian douchebags who like pissing you off and starting shit. I mean,” he adds hastily, “besides Fleury. No offense, dude.”

Flower just says, “Eh. I’m much better-looking than Bergeron. I can see why he’s angry all the time, with me around for competition.”

“Right,” snorts Sid, through a bite of peanut butter. “That’s definitely his main issue.”

“Yeah, what is that guy’s problem?” Denis asks, ignoring Flower’s loud, theatrical snort of indignation. “I mean, Causeway guys are all kind of assholes, right?”

“They’re supposed to be assholes to us,” Glasser says. “they’re our rivals, and whatever, that’s fine. But if he keeps starting shit, dude, you should probably talk to his coach or something.”

Sid nods in agreement, but Geno frowns, taking another bite of sandwich to buy himself time to think. It’s not like the idea hadn’t occurred to him, back before...before the last time. But the thought of what kind of consequences that might have, Geno doesn’t think he could do that to another player. Or, at least, not without extreme circumstances.

The circumstances with Bergeron aren’t extreme as much as they are extremely confusing.

“No,” he says, when he realizes Glasser is still looking at him. “Not telling his coach. I think,” he trails off, struck by how conflicted he feels all of a sudden. “I think we done now. I think problems over, we just staying away.”

“Yeah, we’ve heard that one before,” Flower says, with a significant glance at Sid and Glasser. “And then next party we all go to, shit goes down again.”

Geno narrows his eyes at Sid. “You told them about Halloween?”

“We guessed,” Glasser says, before Sid can answer. “It wasn’t hard, dude, with the way you took off.”

Flower nods in agreement.

“If he told Bergeron’s coach,” Denis pipes up, “wouldn’t G get into trouble, right along with him? I mean, he was fighting, too.”

Flower scoffs. “Not if Bergeron was the one starting shit, and G was just defending himself,” he says, crossing his arms over his chest and shooting a dark look around the group. “And of course we’d back him up on that.”

“No!” Geno says, much louder than he’d meant to, and they all turn sharply to look at him, Glasser’s
last bite of sandwich poised halfway to his mouth. “Not doing that. Already said not talking to coach. Is done.”

He must really look intimidating, because Flower immediately backs down, drawing in on himself a little, and Sid’s eyes are almost comically wide.

“So what,” Glasser says carefully, after a tense pause. “You’re just not gonna go out and party anymore? You’re just gonna let him win like that.”

“He not win,” says Geno, maybe a bit more snappishly than he’d intended, because Glasser’s mouth sets in a hard line. “I just take a little time. Not never going out again, just taking break. Other guys have cars, you get ride with them.”

“That’s not the only reason we asked,” Glasser says, and something in his defensive tone catches Geno, and he wills himself to back down, taking a breath.

“I know,” he says at last, and Glasser brightens a little. “Also ask because I bring best drinks.”

They finish up lunch and get back to sorting. By the time Geno’s mom gets home, they’ve nearly gotten everything cleared out and organized, with an enormous load set aside for Geno to haul to Goodwill in the morning. She takes one look at it and hugs each of them, ruffling Denis’ hair.

“Pizza is in car,” she says, nodding to Geno. “You go bring in?”

“Aw, Mrs. Malkin, no restaurant leftovers?” Glasser says. He grins beseechingly at her.

She rolls her eyes, laughing, but hands him a large paper bag on top of the stack of papers she’s carrying. “Geno and Denis are tired of restaurant food,” she says, casting them both a mock-stern look as Geno shakes his head dutifully and Denis tries to look innocent. “But I remember you like. I bring cabbage rolls and bread, and you share with other boys.”

Glasser takes the bag, holding it close as she bustles off into the den, and Denis starts getting down plates.

They eat pizza and cabbage rolls and dark rye bread while they watch old episodes of Criminal Minds, and then the guys take off and Denis wanders upstairs to play on his computer. Left alone on the couch, Geno turns the volume down low and lets himself zone out, thinking vaguely about maybe taking a shower, or possibly checking to see if they have any ice cream left.

And then he thinks of Bergeron, and of how sick he’d felt at even the idea of going to his coach; of hanging him out to dry like that. He thinks about Bergeron’s mouth against his, and about how the most surprising part of the whole night had been how he hadn’t been very surprised at all.

Clearly Bergeron had not been on the same page, though, and memories of his face as he pulled away from the kiss still flash through Geno’s mind when he closes his eyes. It’s not like he had forced Bergeron by any stretch, he knows that, but the sick thrill of embarrassment that anyone would have such a reaction to kissing him sets his teeth on edge. It lurks in the back of his mind, frustration and humiliation simmering low in his belly any time he thinks about it too hard.

No matter, he tells himself. He’ll lay low for awhile, stay away from a few parties, give himself some time to think. Hopefully by then, everything will have settled out, and even if they run into each other at a party or a game, he and Bergeron can just ignore each other.
“Patrice,” his mom says, laying her palm flat against the curve of his cheek. He doesn’t lean into her, even though he kind of wants to. “You don’t have to do this, you know.”

He avoids her eyes, trying not to rub the spot where she’d touched him. “I know I don’t have to,” he says, flashing her a smile. “I want to help. It’s not like I’m doing anything else right now.”

She hums, like she’s thinking about arguing, but relents eventually.

“Alright,” she says. She’s peering at him like she can see right through him. “What did you do? I feel like you’re trying to make up for something before I find out and you get in trouble for it.”

Patrice glares levelly at her. “Really? I’m offering to help you run errands, and you accuse me of getting into trouble?” He sighs dramatically. “I’m wounded.”

His mother rolls her eyes, but she looks more amused than anything. “We’re not -- your dad and I were just concerned, you know? First the fights, and how late you were coming home, and your lovely face...”

She reaches to touch his cheek again, the pads of her fingers pressing down against the skin beneath his eye.

“It’s not like you. We just worry,” she says.

“Mom,” he whines, finally pulling away from her, moving far enough back that the entirety of the breakfast bar is between them. They’ve always been an affectionate family, but this is different; almost stifling. “I’m not a kid. You don’t have to,” he gestures toward his face. “Inspect me.”

She rolls her eyes and says, “Okay, Patrice. I thought I was the one volunteering at the assisted living facility, but by all means, please go out of your way to get to the one Costco in a 50-mile radius to pick up groceries for them. Please do that. Because you couldn’t be spending your Sunday doing something more fun.”

“This is fun.”

“It is not fun,” she says, decisively. “It’s buying Depends and applesauce for people with dentures.” She rolls her eyes. “Who am I kidding? If my friends caught me trying to argue my teenage son out of running errands for me, they’d never speak to me again. Go. Go on, get out of here.”

“You sound sarcastic,” he says, swiping her Costco card from the counter and fitting it into the pocket of his jeans. He’s trying not to grin too brightly at her. “Is this some reverse psychology thing, Mom? I’m doing this for you. So you don’t have to go all the way out there. I know how much you hate driving on the highway.”
He can hear her laughing as he leaves the kitchen, calling down the hallway, “I can’t figure out who just manipulated who!”

“Me either,” he calls back before heading out, using the automatic starter to turn the car on before he unlocks the front door. It’s not even fully winter yet, and it’s already below freezing.

She follows him to the door, wrapping her sweater tightly around her shoulders and says, “Call Brad or Tyler to come with you, maybe? Or Johnny Toews, even. Grab lunch while you’re there on me, and call it a thank-you.”

“Yeah, maybe,” he says, but he knows he won’t, and he wonders if she knows it too. “Thanks, Mom.”

He doesn’t call anyone. He feels lighter by the time he’s out on the highway, taking the I-90 up past Consol. Something innately settling about the long stretch of road in front of him, and the patch of sun that cuts its way through the November gloom.

It’s about an hour to Costco with traffic, but he makes good time, even though the parking lot is packed when he gets there. Not even wasting twenty minutes trying to find a spot can ruin his good mood.

That, it turns out, happens about two minutes after he’s made the first real dent in his list, dropping a couple of cans of chickpeas in with the boxes of Depends and some cans of chocolate Ensure.

One aisle over, obscured by the partition of wholesale flats, he hears, “Sorry, Sunshine. Don't need extra sweets today. Here list. Look! So long already.”

He can’t place the voice, or the reason why it sets an electric surge of anxiety humming under his skin. He doesn’t even have time to think too much about it before he’s rounding the aisle and coming face-to-face with Evgeni Malkin.

Or, face to top-of-head. Malkin’s bent over, wearing ratty sneakers and a frayed pair of jeans, looking for something on the second to last shelf and talking to a vaguely familiar looking kid wearing an orange Costco visor. Patrice catches himself watching the way the cotton of Malkin’s shirt stretches along his shoulders as he laughs. He has to blink a few times to get himself moving again, turning at a fast clip and walking past his cart, having to double back before he remembers to grab it.

He beelines across the store, not stopping until he hits the produce section, bagging up oranges like his life depends on it and willing himself not to jump every time he hears a male voice. Each time he looks up, though, nerves jangling, it isn’t Malkin. Just a dad scolding his kids, or two college guys arguing over which speakers to buy. He’s almost begun to believe he’s in the clear, standing at the counter ordering cold cuts as the last item on his list, when he sees Malkin again.

Malkin doesn’t see Patrice, though, as he just continues speaking quietly on his phone in Russian. Patrice isn’t close enough to make out anything but the sound of unfamiliar vowels, but that’s more than close enough.

It’s not exactly running away if he just happens to be turning in a different direction and moving fast.

He stops by the baked goods section for bread, arranging it precariously on top of everything else so that it doesn’t get squashed, and he’s almost home free. The Costco warehouse is huge, almost overwhelmingly so, but Patrice can’t help checking over his shoulder every few minutes. Like Malkin is going to pop out from behind a display, with ready fists and some more choice words
about Patrice’s captaining style.

It makes his fists clench just thinking about it, the frustration and confusion and rage he’s come to associate with this kid. Every time thinking they’re done, it’s over, until the next time they get even stupider.

His stomach drops as he turns into the frozen foods section and sees Malkin talking with that same blond kid, sorting through something together on a low shelf. Embarrassment is one thing. He knows the feeling of flushed cheeks, and the way nerves settle sick and low his belly when he misses a penalty shot, or he doesn’t quite get a joke. This isn’t anything as easy as all that, it’s so much shittier.

He busies himself with making sure he has the right number bags of frozen corn and peas, tossing some veggie burgers into the cart that aren’t even on his list. Malkin’s still talking to that kid, reaching his fingers out and bouncing them on the bill of his visor. The kid is giggling, but he’s smacking Malkin’s hand away every time he does it, too, and Patrice is staring so hard he can’t believe they don’t feel it.

“You good at this job, Sunshine,” he’s saying. “You think you quit hockey? Stock shelves for living?”

The kid says, “Yeah, yeah, funny guy. Just try and win games without me.”

“I do it last year,” Malkin says, and he should sound like a douche, but Patrice can hear the smile in his voice. “And I do it year before that too, Sunshine. You good, but you could be better.”

“You’re an asshole,” the kid says, and when he turns to grab something out of the fridge, Patrice can see him smiling.

He waits for it, breathing catching tight in his throat, anticipation curling through him like a swarm of buzzing bees. He wants Malkin to turn around. He wants this thing to be over, so that this invisible, tethered thing between them will finally snap apart. His face is getting hot, he can feel the blush spreading, and he thinks, turn around, turn around, turn around, even when Malkin doesn’t, heading back down the aisle the way he came, his arm easily draped over the kid’s shoulder like it belongs there.

He gets out of there as fast as he can, annoyed at himself for being such an idiot.

Patrice insinuates himself into the self checkout line, taking time to breathe and dig his iPod out of his pocket, tucking the earbuds in and cranking the volume. If Malkin’s hanging around, he doesn’t want to know. He doesn’t want to see. Doesn’t want the opportunity to act on this newfound ambivalence. He keeps his eyes focused straight ahead, tapping his fingers against his thigh in time with the music, trying to remember to breathe.
Thursday before a match against Consol, Johnny can’t sit still. He ducks out of class and texts Pat on his way up to the old art room, shutting the closet door behind himself and leaning his forehead against the cool door. It’s rough with flaking paint, and everything here smells vaguely of turpentine and aging tempera, but there’s a comforting familiarity that goes a long way toward settling the agitated buzz under his skin.

“What’s up with you?” Pat asks, slipping in a couple minutes later and frowning at him critically. “Don’t you have math right now? You never skip math.”

Johnny shrugs. “Just jittery, I guess. Couldn’t sit still, and we were just reviewing in small groups, anyway.”

“Jittery?” Pat snorts. “About the game tomorrow, or something? Come on, Consol can barely string two together this season, and you’re worried about playing them?”

It’s easiest for Johnny to just shrug again, non-committally, and say, “Sure, I guess. That must be it.”

Pat scoffs, but moves in closer, leaning up on tiptoe to get at Johnny’s mouth.

“Is that why you skipped lunch? I haven’t seen you all fucking day.”

“Yeah, I had to finish the homework,” Johnny says, hands settling loosely on Pat’s hips. He doesn’t bother adding that he hadn’t finished the night before because he’d gone to two back to back open skates at the rink by his house instead, coming home exhausted at nearly midnight.

Pat frowns, a little pout turning down the corners of his mouth. “Well shit, I missed you. Bry and Amanda were having some dumb fight and it was weird and quiet.”

Johnny doesn’t know how to respond to this, so he just kisses Pat until his mouth opens a little and he sucks on Johnny’s bottom lip like a reflex, his fingers coming up to tangle in the loose front of Johnny’s jacket. For a blissful moment it calms Johnny’s jangling nerves, eases his mind, until Pat pulls back and looks up into Johnny’s face.

He’s quiet a long moment and then he licks his lips, glancing away as he says, “Hey, so um. Remember the other day in here, when I. Uh. When I said I love you?”

The words spill out too quick, like Pat had been holding them in until they were bursting at his seams, and just like that all of Johnny’s jangling confusion and anxiety come crashing back down into him. He swallows thickly. “Uh-huh?”

Pat shifts uncomfortably, stepping back and putting a couple of inches breathing room between them. “Why didn’t you say it back?”


“You didn’t,” Pat says. He looks hurt, now; drawn up and defensive. “You changed the subject.”

“I did?” Johnny says, stupidly. He’s thinking back, but mostly what he remembers is the hand job. He’d just been expecting more of the same today. A hasty make out, maybe rubbing off on each other a little or something. He’s utterly ill-equipped to handle a conversation like this right now.
“I mean, I just,” Pat starts, faltering lamely and looking at Johnny like he’s hoping Johnny will fill in the blanks for him. “You barely ever say it, dude, but like, you do love me, right?”

Pat’s eyes are trained anywhere but at Johnny’s face.

“Do I-- oh,” Johnny says. “Dude, you know I do. I’m sorry, I just. Do we have to get into this right now?”

Pat glances back toward the door over Johnny’s shoulder, shifting awkwardly. Johnny had expected him to get angry, but instead he just looks smaller; deflated. “No,” he says at last, quietly. “But uh, I dunno. Can we talk about it later, maybe?”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, relieved even as the nerves continue to tighten around his core. “Sure, sorry.” He opens his mouth again, but his throat is so constricted that all he can do is close it again and smile weakly, leaning down to plant a kiss at the corner of Pat’s mouth.

Pat slips arms around him, holding on tight for a long, quiet moment until he says, “Gotta get back to class?”

“Probably should,” says Johnny. “How’s Spanish going?”

Pat makes a face. “Forgot to do the reading. It’s fine, though,” he adds quickly, when he sees Johnny’s frown. “Brandon’s letting me copy for now, and I can just do it when I get home.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” Johnny says, rolling his eyes at Pat’s yeah right snort. “But the whole team’ll kick your ass if you get stuck on academic probation again.”

“Yeah right,” says Pat, and Johnny can see the spark of his usual bravado reemerging behind his smirk. “Like you’d let them.”

“Don’t test your luck,” Johnny tells him, but he smiles back a little and leans in when Pat pulls him down for a last kiss. “I’ll see you at practice.”

“See you then,” Pat says, and just like that he’s gone again, the closet door swinging shut behind him with a quiet snap.

Johnny takes more than his usual allotted minute before heading back himself, sagging back against the dingy wall paneling and taking a few deep breaths. He feels poised on the brink of some dark and unknown sea, scrambling frantically to figure out if Pat is a liferaft or an anchor before he falls.

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The game against Consol is a shitshow. Pat gets Madison on the board in the first period, and then again less than two minutes later, but those are the only goals they score. Consol nets five, and no matter how hard any of them shoot or skate, nothing they do can pull them out of the hole.

Much to Johnny’s relief, the post-game party isn’t really a party at all.

“Just you guys, okay?” Pat says, glancing around at the assembled team in the dressing room as they peel off layers of gear. “My parents are just gone the one night, we can watch movies or play XBox or something.”

Johnny doesn’t want to go at all. He thinks about his bed, and about just going home and pulling the covers up over his head and disappearing until he has to deal with soccer and Patrice in the morning. But then Pat sits down next to him and gives his arm a squeeze and says, “Hey, you want me to
drive?"

Johnny sighs. "Nah, I got it."

They drive in silence, the radio on low and set to some dumb pop station. He drives exactly the speed limit and takes every turn extra carefully, specifically because he wants to take them harder. He wants to drive for hours, for miles.

Even with just the team, the house is crowded enough that Johnny loses Pat almost immediately. He grabs a soda from a collection on the kitchen counter and wanders out into the backyard, as the sounds of a TV being turned on and loud arguments of what game to put in first emanate from the den.

Above him, the sky is a starless velvety haze, the distant blinking of an airplane the only thing visible through ambient city glow. It’s genuinely cold now at night; no chirping of insects to cut through the dark, only the rattle of dead leaves in a soft, chilly wind, and the creak of the back gate shifting on its hinges.

"Hey," somebody says softly, and there are footsteps behind him. It's Pat. Of course it is. He comes to stand at Johnny's side and reaches out to grab his hand, twining their fingers together.

"You should leave me alone right now," Johnny says, but his voice sounds weird, even to himself. "I'm not good company, Pat. Seriously."

Next to him, Pat shrugs; a soft rustling of material snatched away instantly on a renewed gust of wind. "I was thinking we could go upstairs," he says eventually, thumb rubbing idle circles over the back of Johnny's hand between them. "Maybe we could...talk."

"What makes you think I want to talk to you right now, Pat?"

Pat smirks. "Who wouldn't want to talk to me, baby? No shut-out tonight, I'm a hero."

He leans heavily against Johnny's shoulder, dead arming him, and Johnny can't tell if he wants to kick him or kiss him or both. The feeling is so achingly familiar that for a moment Johnny clings to it, even to the mingled frustration.

"You're a menace," Johnny says. "Why don't you ever just do what I want you to do?"

Pat pulls back and he's grinning, a little wild around the eyes. "Trust me," he says, leaning in close to press a kiss to Johnny's cheek. "You want me to do this part. I promise."

"Really not in the mood," Johnny mumbles, but then Pat's hand is sliding against the front of his pants, tracing his fingers around the thick swell of Johnny's dick through the material. This is so dumb, and there are so many reasons that Johnny should have gone straight home.

"Feels like you are, though," Pat says, mouth pressed right up against Johnny's neck. "Come upstairs. I want you to fuck me."

Johnny goes.

Upstairs, it's different. He can't stop touching, can't stop letting Pat touch him. It's nice for once, to not be in control. He doesn't say it out loud, but Pat seems to get it. He's more forceful about the way he unbuckles Johnny's pants, pushing him up against the door and stroking him hard, sucking his breath from his lungs with deep, hungry kisses.
“I bought condoms,” Johnny says, when he finally comes up for air. “But they’re at my house.”

Pat kisses him again. Kisses and pushes him in the direction of the bed. “Whatever,” he says, voice slurred against Johnny’s mouth. “It’s not like we’ve fucked anyone else, right?”

Johnny’s breath is heavy in his lungs for a long moment before he nods, fingers curling against Pat’s sides and bringing them back closer together. “No one else,” he says. “Nope.”

It’s new and familiar all at the same time.

Pat digs the lube out of his nightstand drawer, and Johnny fingers him open, distracted by sloppy kisses and Pat’s hands groping his ass.

Pat says, “Seriously, man. C’mon. I’m not getting any more ready here.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says. “Uh, okay, just let me. Um.”

He sits back and gets out of his own jeans, tossing them off the bed while Pat positions a pillow under his own ass.

“Like this, okay?” Pat says, squirming a little until he gets comfortable and toeing at Johnny’s knee. “On my back.”

Johnny hesitates a second, then nods, looking down at Pat’s expectant, already sweaty face, and leans down to drop a kiss on his mouth. “Anything you want,” he says.

“Want you,” Pat mumbles, cheeks flushing again in uncharacteristic shyness that makes Johnny laugh.

“Duh,” he says, and reaches between them to slick more lube over himself. “Um, just tell me if it sucks or whatever, okay? I don’t want to hurt you.”

Pat nods. He says, “Just wanna feel you in me. Know what it’s like.”

“Yeah, me too,” Johnny breathes, words sticking in his throat as he slowly pushes in, and then letting out a slow, shaky breath. “You okay?”

“Fuck me already and I’ll let you know,” Pat tells him.

Johnny rolls his eyes, but he gives his hips an experimental little hitch, once, and again, biting down on his lip and willing himself not to come from every little shift of their bodies together. “God,” he breathes, giving another couple of little thrusts that make Pat’s legs twitch at his sides. “This is--”

“Yeah,” Pat finishes for him, with a little nod, arching his back and stifling a sharp noise when Johnny’s angle shifts. “Shit, yeah. Right there.”

Johnny tries to do as he’s told, tries to keep his brain on line. Not that Pat seems much more together, although his face still reads as a confused mix of desperation and discomfort. He fumbles for his own dick and Johnny lets him, wishing he felt coordinated enough to help, rather than to just hang onto Pat’s hip for leverage and watch him jerk himself off.

“This good?” he asks, and Pat nods, eyes closed but head bobbing in affirmative as the hand on his dick speeds up, getting fast and loose the way it always does when he’s about to come.

Johnny means to fuck him through it, he really does, but his own orgasm creeps up on him, building past the point of no return until all he can do is cling to Pat and swear as Pat’s eyes go wide. The
fingers on his dick still as Johnny sags forward against him, pulling out messily and collapsing with his face buried in Pat’s neck.

“Shit,” he mumbles, words slurred into Pat’s sweat-damp skin. “I thought I had longer than that. Sorry.”

Pat gives a slightly hysterical little giggle, fingers coming up to comb through Johnny’s hair. “Don’t apologize,” he says, and Johnny can hear the grin in his voice; the self-satisfied game-winning-goal lilt of the words. “That was fucking hot, man.”

Johnny laughs, too, turning his head to lie with it on Pat’s shoulder, sticky and too-hot in the small room, but unwilling to move. Any space after what they’ve just done is going to feel like the Grand fucking Canyon between them.

He looks up and Pat grins down from the weird angle, planting a kiss on his forehead. “Wanna jerk me off?”

Johnny curls fingers around Pat’s dick, getting right to the business of making Pat moan and arch and press up into his grip for more. Downstairs, things have gotten louder, or else Johnny is more focused now. In here, though, the darkness feels padded around them; cushioned and secluded while the world spins out of control outside.

“I love you,” he says, hearing the words out loud in his own voice before he registers thinking them. “Christ, Pat, I love you.”

Pat stiffens and looks at Johnny, eyes wide and lips parted, and he says, “Yeah,” quietly, sounding like he’s had the wind knocked out of him. “Johnny, yeah. I love you so fucking much.”

He comes a moment later, his heels digging into the sheets where their legs are tangled, and for a long, long moment they lie there, breathing loud and harsh together in the quiet dark.

”You should see yourself right now,” Pat says finally. If he could see himself, he wouldn’t look nearly as smug.

Johnny swallows. His mouth is dry, and he can’t remember what he did with his soda. "Wanna get cleaned up?" he asks, instead of I wish I could see you like this all the time.

“Way to harsh the afterglow,” Pat retorts, but he’s still smiling a little as he leans in to smack a kiss on Johnny’s lips.

“Grab one of the towels from your gym bag, or something,” Johnny says, nodding to the heap of miscellaneous workout gear in the corner of Pat’s room.

“Pushy, pushy,” Pat mutters, but he rolls off the bed to dig around in the mess.

They clean off and locate discarded articles of clothing before they head back out. At the top of the landing, though, Johnny grabs Pat’s arm, making him pause. “Hey,” he says quietly, “I just wanted to say, I’m sorry about tonight.”

Pat looks like he wants to hit him, trying to yank his arm back. “Dude, what the fuck—”

“I mean about the game,” Johnny amends quickly. "You were alone out there tonight. I let you down. The team," he stops, breathing hard again, and then Pat’s fingers are soft against his neck, thumb stroking gently. "We shouldn't have let that happen."
Pat doesn’t brush it off, thank goodness, just looks steadily back at him with clear, bright eyes.

"Sucks," he says. "Gotta work on those turnovers in our zone, for starters," he says, pitching his voice a little higher and emulating Coach, "The first thing to do when trying to play a defensive game? Don't let the assholes on the other team score because you screwed up. You want to know why? Because later, we'll mock you for it mercilessly." He grins.

Johnny still doesn't smile. It hurts, tightening in his chest like a vice, but he knows Pat is just trying to make a joke. He’d be embarrassed if he wasn’t too busy being grateful. “Thanks,” he says at last, and starts down the stairs.

"Yeah, dude, of course,” Pat says, falling into step beside him. “And if you ever apologize to me after sex again? I’m gonna kill you, just so we’re clear.”

They stick close together for the rest of the night, curling up at the end of the sofa to watch Shaw demolish Bollig, Saader, and Carbomb in Call of Duty. Pat leans comfortably into Johnny’s side, and he’s nearly asleep by the time Johnny finally starts digging for his car keys.

“Wanna hang out after your soccer stuff tomorrow?” Pat asks. He keeps shifting in his seat every couple seconds in a way that’s making Johnny’s cheeks get all hot.

“Sure,” he says, turning onto Pat’s street. “We can get lunch or something, ‘kay?”

Pat smiles, bright and sweet and sleepy, and more than anything Johnny wishes he could just stay here tonight. Wishes he could curl around him, bury his face in the back of Pat’s neck, and just sleep, but he’s got soccer in only a few hours.

“‘Kay,” says Pat. “Text me when you’re done with Captain Perfect and the kids.” He leans over and kisses Johnny one last time, pushing way into his space. “See you tomorrow.”
November: Geno

Geno can’t remember the last time he went straight home after a game. His mother, his teammates, and even his Coach all look at him with varying degrees of concern when he tells them.

“But dude,” Nealer whines, toweling off so his hair sticks up in all directions, “we won.” He gives Geno an expectant look, like Geno had somehow forgotten in the last three minutes since leaving the ice, and this will clear everything up.

“I know,” Geno tells him, with a solemn nod. “Learning to read scoreboard first thing I do when I move here.”

Behind them, Martin guffaws loudly, and Nealer chucks his sweaty towel at Geno’s head.

“You know what I mean.”


“Not like that’s ever stopped you before,” Nealer gripes, but he lets it drop when Geno doesn’t respond.

The rest of the guys head off to some big blowout up north, while Geno collects his things and drives home. He’d expected to be jealous, maybe, of everyone else going off to celebrate without him, but mostly he’s just relieved. He’s thinking thoughts about sweatpants and video games and grilled cheese sandwiches when he walks in the door and is immediately met by a harassed-looking Denis.

“Hi,” Denis tells him, and then abruptly drops his voice, switching to Russian and jerking his head in the direction of the kitchen. “Dad’s home.”

“Hi, um.” Something in the pit of Geno’s stomach flipflops uncomfortably. Down the hall, Geno can hear the sounds of the fridge door opening and closing, and water running. He asks, “Does Mom know?”

Denis nods once, biting his lip. “I texted her. She dropped me off after your game and went back to help close up the restaurant, but she said she’d be back soon.” Then he brightens, and adds, “Hey, good game, by the way.”

“Thanks,” Geno says, looping an arm around Denis’s shoulders and giving him a squeeze. “I’m starving, you want a sandwich?”

“Not really,” Denis says, shooting a stony glance in the direction of the continuing kitchen sounds, but he follows along behind Geno all the same.

It’s been months since Geno last saw their father, but he looks the same as ever, puttering around the spotless kitchen and humming tunelessly to himself. A strange jumble of feelings filter through him as he watches, but he doesn’t have much time to dwell on them before his father turns and breaks into a wide smile.

“Evgeni!” he booms, covering the distance between them in two powerful strides to tug Geno into a quick one-armed hug. “Your brother said you would be home soon. He said you had a game, how was it?”

“Good,” Geno says. “We won, five to two.”
His dad beams. “Five to two,” he repeats. “Five to two isn’t bad. Not as good as five to nothing, though, right? Maybe that defense needs some extra practice.”

Beside him, Denis opens his mouth, looking livid, so Geno says quickly, “Madison is a good team, so we’re happy with it. I’m sure Coach will go over everything we need to work on.”

“You coach must know what he’s doing, putting you in charge,” says his dad, with a satisfied little chuckle. “Your Mama told me you were worried when he made you captain, but I told her it was nothing, that you’d be fine. And see? I was right.”

“At least Mom comes to his games,” Denis snaps, and then flinches back reflexively as their father takes a step toward him.

“You should know better than to use that tone with me,” he tells Denis warningly, and the two of them glare at each other.

“Hey,” Geno says, stepping in between them once the moment has stretched out long enough to make the hairs on the back of his neck prickle. He gives Denis’s shoulder a little shake. “Go put on Mario or something, okay? I want to finish talking to Dad and get a snack and I’ll be right up.”

He half expects their father to interject, to insist on continuing the confrontation with Denis, but instead he falls back, getting a beer from the fridge and rummaging through the utensil drawer for the bottle opener.

“Does he speak to your mother that way?” he asks, frowning in the direction of Denis’s stomping footsteps disappearing upstairs.

“Not really,” Geno lies, thinking privately that there probably isn’t a person they know who Denis hasn’t mouthed off at recently. Rarer is seeing him so genuinely angry. “I don’t think he meant any disrespect, he’s just a kid.”

His father snorts, taking a sip of beer. “You were never so rude at his age,” he says, giving Geno an appraising look. “And that American accent he’s picked up only makes it sound worse.”

“How long will you be back for?” Geno asks, trying to steer the conversation back into neutral territory and ignoring his father’s affronted look at being cut off mid-rant. “Why didn’t you tell us you would be coming?”

His father takes another swig of beer before answering, leaning back against the cabinets in the rumpled grey business suit he always wears to travel. “It was very last-minute. I got called to oversee a project here for a couple of weeks, and had to get on a plane immediately. You all would have been asleep, I didn’t want to bother you.”

Geno nods silently, willing back all the familiar comments clamoring through his head about lame excuses. About how he’s pretty sure shooting any one of them a text in the middle of the night would’ve been less weird than showing up out of the blue like this.

Instead, he says simply, “Oh,” and, “was the flight alright?”

“Long,” says his dad, and Geno hums in commiseration. “I’m going to wait for your mother to come home, and then I think I’ll go to bed.”

“Right,” Geno says. He’s not very hungry anymore, so he just grabs two juice pouches from the fridge and a bag of pretzels. “I think I’ll go upstairs, then. Welcome home, Dad.”
His dad claps him firmly on the shoulder one more time as Geno heads for the stairs. “Thank you. And good job, again, with the game.”

“Thanks,” says Geno. He waffles for a moment before adding, “You should come next Friday. We play Edmonton Municipal, it should be a good one.”

“We’ll see,” says his dad, with a nod. “The next couple of weeks are going to be very busy for me, but you know I enjoy watching you play.”

“I know,” Geno tells him, turning and hurrying up the stairs before annoyance and frustration seep into his expression and give him away.

His feelings must be clear enough when he reaches the upstairs office, because Denis pauses his round of Smash Bros and raises his eyebrows. “Don’t let him get to you,” he says in English, trading Geno a controller for the second juice pouch and restarting the game.

Geno snorts a mirthless laugh, plopping down next to Denis on the saggy old couch and scrolling through the character select screen. “Right, because that exactly what you did.” He smirks a little and adds, “He tell me you have bad American accent.”

“Oh, I know. That was one of the first things said to me when I got home.” Denis switches back to Russian and lowers his voice, imitating their father, “Denis, your accent is getting terrible, I can hardly understand you!” He rolls his eyes. “Heads up, I think he’s going to try and take us with him to church on Sunday, for some Motherland acculturation or whatever.”

On screen, his Princess Peach throws Geno’s Link off a cliff in a fit of button-mashing.

“Maybe Mom will need us at the restaurant on Sunday morning,” Geno says hopefully.

“Yeah right,” Denis grumbles. “She’ll probably think it’s a good idea, too. Or make us go so she doesn’t have to.”

They’re quiet for a few minutes, just focusing on the game until Geno’s phone vibrates. He ignores it, locked in heated battle with Samus.

“You gonna get that?” Denis asks, when it vibrates again.

Geno shakes his head, not taking his eyes off the screen. “It’s just one of the guys, probably.”

“Aw,” Denis teases, “they miss you! Or maybe it’s Bergeron, wondering why you’re not around to rearrange his face.”

“He doesn’t have my number,” Geno snaps, probably just a hair too quick, because Denis’s eyes widen and his smirk deepens.

“This is really dumb,” Denis tells him. “Just so you know.”

Geno narrows his eyes, but doesn’t shift focus from where he’s trying to knock Star Fox off a platform with a combo move. “What’s dumb? Your face is dumb.”

“No,” says Denis, with a long-suffering sigh. “Like, this whole stupid avoiding thing you’re doing. It isn’t going to change anything, you can’t stay away from him forever. You’re in the same division, you go to the same parties. Sooner or later you guys’ll run into each other.”

This time, Geno does look over at him. He gets thrown into empty space for his trouble. “You’re
thirteen,” he says, grudgingly. “What do you know?”

Denis seems unperturbed by this. He leans back and tosses his controller aside, fixing Geno with a calculating look uncannily reminiscent of their mother’s. “It’s like I said, you guys have to run into each other again, right? At a game or a party or something. The only thing that’s going to change is if you act like an idiot about it or not.”

“It’s,” Geno starts, and then breaks off. He isn’t really sure what he’s even arguing about, just that everything about the situation up until now has always seemed so tangled up and complicated, and yet somehow Denis has a point. “It isn’t that simple,” he says finally, but even he doesn’t really believe the words. Neither, it seems, does Denis.

“Ugh, you guys are like Becky Morris and Matt McDonald in my class,” he tells Geno, with an infuriatingly superior air for someone talking about eighth grade. “They push each other around and tease and stuff, but they’re so into each other, it’s so dumb. Oh god, maybe he likes you.” He draws out the word in a sing-song, giggling when Geno sputters.

“We’re not--” Geno finally manages, glaring over at his brother even as he feels his cheeks flush hot. “He doesn’t. We are not like that. What are you talking about?”

“Oh come on, I’m just giving you shit,” Denis says, grinning and elbowing Geno in the ribs. “You’re always so touchy.”

“I am not,” Geno replies, with as much dignity as he can muster. “And don’t say ‘shit’, Mama will wash your mouth out with soap.”

“Mama swears worse than I do,” Denis retorts. He resumes the game and leaves it at that, both of them falling silent, save for the clicking of controllers and the occasional muttered curse.
November: Patrice

Patrice goes to Avec with the singular purpose of finding Carey Price.

It’s a Saturday night and there are posters up for a show later, bright and gaudy, and Patrice pays the fifteen dollars and lets the bouncer secure an under-eighteen band around his wrist. Once inside, however, he starts to have misgivings.

It’s a crapshoot to begin with; he’s never even been here on a weekend, and for all he knows, Price hasn’t, either. There are so many people he can barely squeeze a path to the bar, where he perches on the last remaining stool and orders a diet Coke and turns to scan the room.

It’s dark, with hazy pink lighting around the perimeter of the dance floor that gives everything a skewed effect. He thinks he sees the shape of a cowboy hat for a second, but then it’s gone, or maybe had never even been there at all. Maybe this was a terrible plan. A tall guy wearing about half a dozen colorful boas wanders past, giving Patrice an appraising smile. Patrice smiles back reflexively, before devoting himself to downing the rest of his Coke. He tosses a couple singles on the bar, and takes off for the door.

Fuck it, this had been a mistake. He doesn’t feel so alien now as he had the first couple of times, but his coming had done nothing to take the edge off the restless agitation brewing in him. Maybe he should have texted Brandon or something, before coming. Then, at least, he’d have had some company.

Outside, he tugs on his coat and heads for the street. The bus stop is only a couple blocks away and he’s already thinking of bed, or maybe a shower, when he hears his name shouted from the parking lot.

“Bergeron!”

He turns to see a figure in a conspicuous cowboy hat standing silhouetted under the orange sodium glow of a parking lot lamp, and stops mid-stride.

“Where are you going in such a hurry?” Price asks, teeth flashing white in a grin as he moves forward out of the glare. He’s taller than Patrice remembered, or maybe it’s just the hat and boots. Patrice can hear the heels click on the tarmac when he takes another step.

“No in a hurry,” Patrice lies. “I was just bored. Thought I’d head home.”

Price looks down at him. They’re standing very close together now, in a way that feels deceptively casual with Price swaying forward just a bit to lean into his space.

“Oh.” Price tilts his head, full, dark lips curling up in an easy smile. “You sure you don’t want to stick around? I’m sure we could find a way to keep you entertained.”

Patrice looks up at him and laughs; feels it bubbling up through him like soda fizz. He says, “Yeah, sure, I guess.”

“You guess?” Price teases, but Patrice just leans up on his toes and presses their mouths together.

It’s a heady, freeing sensation to just go along with this, with some kid he barely knows and doesn’t have to know. There’s no one to explain himself to, real accountability. He just settles in and lets Price control the kiss, hands sliding into Patrice’s back pockets to draw him in closer.
There’s no careful hesitation here. Instead, when he sighs, Price just crowds in at the invitation until they’re tangled up, grinding their hips together so Patrice can feel the hard press of his dick.

“You have anything to drink?” Patrice asks, breathless and licking his lips as they pull apart at last, Price’s hands still firm on his ass. The nerves are back; a low-level flutter in the pit of his belly that seem simultaneously about everything at once, and nothing at all.

He’s tired of it. Tired of the anxiety and confusion, and all the sneaking around. There’s something heady about standing here now in an open parking lot, twined around another boy while strangers wander past without a second glance.

“There’s a bottle of Jim Beam in my back seat,” says Price. “I’m parked right around the corner again.”

They end up back in the backseat of Price’s Jeep, making out lazily as they pass the bottle back and forth and not talking much. It’s nice, though; companionably quiet. The liquor burns Patrice’s throat, but after the first few swigs, he mostly just tastes the sticky-sweetness of it as a cottony buzz sets in.

“There’s a thing at the club later,” Price says, shifting slightly so Patrice can straddle his lap and have better access to his neck. His Stetson hat is in the front seat where he’s thrown it, hair tousled over his forehead. “You ever been to a drag show?”

“Nope,” says Patrice. “But that explains the guy with all the feathers.”

Price laughs, and then sighs as Patrice’s teeth graze just below his ear. “Yeah, probably. I was gonna watch, and you should come if you want.”

His fingers are working Patrice’s fly open as he talks, tugging the tight purple denim as far down Patrice’s thighs as it can go in this position.

“Sure,” Patrice says, distracted by Price’s fingers exploring over his bare ass now, and the sudden absence of restricting fabric over his dick. “Sure, yeah, um.” He pauses, glancing at Price, who’s already grinning like he knows what Patrice wants before he says it. “Is there room back here for you to fuck me, do you think?”

Price’s smile broadens, and his fingers slip lower, teasing over Patrice’s rim and making him shiver. “There’s room. We’ll make room.”

“Okay,” Patrice says, proud of the way his voice only hitches on the last syllable. “Cool.”

“You’ve done this before, right?” Price asks as an afterthought, digging lube out of the seatback pocket and smoothing it over a couple of fingers as Patrice tugs his pants the rest of the way off.

Only once, Patrice doesn’t say. “Not in the backseat of a car, but yeah,” he says instead, glancing around. “Uh, how should I..?”


He has another quick swallow of bourbon and hands the bottle back to Patrice, who takes a long swig before screwing the cap back on and tossing it aside. There isn’t a whole lot of room, and the leather seat is sticky and hot, but at the first press of Price’s fingers, he quickly forgets all that.

It’s clear Price knows what he’s doing, offering just enough slow, stroking pleasure to balance out the third finger he adds, the way he carefully stretches Patrice and eases him open without bringing him too close to the edge already.
When Patrice and Danny had done this, it had taken a few tries to get it right, trial and error, and even then what stands out the most in Patrice’s memory is the achey discomfort. Danny had been sweet and careful, but here, now, Patrice is halfway convinced that may have been part of the problem.

He’s shaking by the time Price is done with his fingers, drunk and loose and so hard he doesn’t dare touch himself. He says, “Give me a minute, sorry,” and Price pauses after rolling a condom on, leaning around to kiss him, deep and wet.

“Tell me when,” he says, against Patrice’s lips between kisses, and Patrice moans, nodding.

“Okay,” he breathes after a minute or two, “okay yeah, I’m good.”

There’s an awkward moment of getting situated again, Patrice shuffling around until his knee isn’t in danger of slipping off the seat.

Maybe the extra fingering helped, or maybe he’s just shy of drunk, but it feels much less uncomfortable this time around.

“Shit, you’re tight,” Price grunts through gritted teeth, pausing to give them both time to adjust.

Patrice moans in agreement, and then hiccups a surprised breath when Price pulls out halfway and thrusts back in again. It’s a heavy, raw sort of feeling, and he languishes in it for a few seconds, or maybe it’s a few minutes. He loses track of time, riding out the practiced swing of Price’s hips until he’s relaxed enough that his muscles don’t tense and flutter in anticipation.

He feels the sound he makes when Price hits his prostate more than he hears it leaving his throat, a harsh, loud gasp that hangs in the stuffy air between them until Price adjusts his angle and does it again. Price stays in deep, grinding into him and nudging and stroking over the spot until Patrice thinks he may shake apart.

He doesn’t even realize he’s begging until Price’s breathless voice cuts through the haze, saying, “Okay, then move your arm so I can jerk you off.”

Patrice giggles, high and a little hysterical, but a moment later there are fingers curled around his dick, warm and firm, and then it’s only seconds before he’s coming with another well-timed thrust of Price’s hips.

Price keeps moving until Patrice sags forward, boneless and panting and suddenly very aware of how uncomfortably warm he is.

“Ok, uh. You can finish,” he tries, and then winces when Price’s hips shift and his still-hard dick moves with them. “I’m just kind of sensitive.”

“Nah.” With one fluid movement, Price pulls out, leaving Patrice suddenly, achingly empty. He leans down, though, still fitted neatly between Patrice’s legs, and kisses him. “I don’t wanna overdo it. It’s cool, I got this.”

Patrice shifts around, leaning back against the door as they kiss, and between them Patrice can hear the slick, rhythmic sounds of Price jerking himself off through the condom. It’s only another minute or two before he tenses, groaning raggedly into Patrice’s mouth.

He slumps down as far as he can to make room and Price tangles their legs together. His heart is beating so hard and fast that Patrice can feel it through the thin material of their shirts, echoed by the rush-rush pounding of blood in his own ears. He sighs contentedly.
“I have a towel around here somewhere, for you to wipe off with,” Price says, without shifting from where he’s got his face pressed into Patrice’s neck. “I’ll grab it in a sec.”

“No rush,” Patrice tells him. If he lies very still with his eyes closed, he can chase the waning buzz of alcohol and orgasm, everything still pleasantly floaty around him and his muscles unwound. “If you can reach the bourbon, pass me that, too.”

Price laughs, a steady rumble in his chest, but a moment later he shifts, leaning off the seat and digging around until he comes back with the towel and the bottle. He takes another few swigs while Patrice cleans himself up and tugs on his pants, and then they trade.

It’s quiet and friendly between them; none of the charged frustration and confusion Patrice associates with Malkin. None of the agitated nerves squirming under his skin. He takes another gulp of Jim Beam, watching Price’s profile against the lighter darkness outside the tinted window.

“Thanks,” he says. It seems appropriate enough.

Price laughs again, fastening up his pants and swiping fingers through his hair a couple of times until it falls back into obnoxiously flawless disarray over his forehead. “Glad I could entertain you.”

Patrice elbows him, shaking his own hair back and leaning forward between the front seats to check his own reflection in the rearview mirror. “I think I needed that,” he shrugs, flopping back onto the bench seat and accepting the bottle back from Price. They’ve managed to put a significant dent in the contents. “I’ve been all…” he gestures vaguely, but Price nods.

“Tightly wound?”

“Yeah,” Patrice says, and then narrows his eyes when Price smirks knowingly. “Hey.”

“No offense,” Price adds, still smirking. “Whatever, it’s kinda sexy. You’re all tense and wound up, so it’s super fucking hot when you lose your cool and start getting all demanding. Looks good on you.”

“Um,” Patrice says, but Price doesn’t sound like a dick. He’s only watching Patrice, still smiling a little, so Patrice just smiles back self consciously and says, “Thanks,” again.

Price reaches over and ruffles fingers through Patrice’s bangs. “Sure thing, man. Look me up any time you need a little unwinding.” He digs his phone out of his jacket pocket on the floor and checks the time. “You wanna go in and catch the show? It only started about ten minutes ago.”

They find space against the far wall, crammed in behind a mass of bodies all swaying and jostling disjointedly to music blaring from the overhead speakers. Patrice can’t see very well, but he doesn’t mind; content to lean against the cool brick behind him and focus on the way Price’s hand curls over his thigh. His muscles twinge and ache with every movement, but in a pleasant, distant sort of way, deadened by the warm alcohol buzz.

Price himself yells and cheers along with everyone else as the queens strut the runway for their numbers, to everything from show tunes to dubstep. Later, though, after the lights go down and the music goes up, he pulls Patrice away from the wall and slips arms back around him, fitting their mouths together as they dance in the dark, surrounded by a hundred faceless strangers.

“I’m good to drive, if you want a ride home,” he shouts against Patrice’s cheek over the music, some time later when the soft haze of Patrice’s buzz has begun to fade around its edges.

Patrice nods, and Price tips his hat in affirmation, grinning as Patrice’s laughter gets buried under the
blaring bass.
Pat spends lunch at the diner groping Johnny’s thigh unabashedly under the table, while Johnny tries desperately to keep Patrice from noticing. Johnny is pissed, but Pat can’t seem to stop touching him; leaning against his side in the booth, carding fingers idly through the short hair at the back of his neck, and finally jerking him off in the cab of Johnny’s truck in the diner parking lot before they head home. Johnny is less pissed after that.

He expects to feel different, somehow, which is silly. Johnny knows it’s silly, but he still can’t help it. He wasn’t exactly a virgin, per se, but this was supposed to be some big step, right? The world at large has always told him so, anyway.

They waste Saturday afternoon on the couch in his living room, watching a *Die Hard* marathon and making out whenever they think Johnny’s parents are at a safe distance.

On Monday morning, Johnny rolls out of bed, standing in his boxers in front of the full-length mirror on the back of his door for a bleary inspection. He rubs his eyes, stretches, shimmies out of his shorts, and tries again, twisting this way and that. All he comes up with are the beginnings of a zit on his left shoulder, and a couple of sizeable hickey. He shrugs and gets into the shower.

Pat’s ready and waiting when Johnny pulls up, a travel mug in each hand, and Johnny reaches for his automatically as Pat slides into the cab.

Johnny says, “Hey,” and Pat leans in and kisses him, still holding the mug. Johnny’s fingers curl over his around it and he kisses back, just for a moment. “We’re gonna be late.”

“We are not,” Pat says grumpily, relinquishing the cup at last and settling back to tug his seatbelt on. “You’re just afraid my parents are gonna see.”

Johnny doesn’t deny it; doesn’t say anything at all as he turns out of the development and heads for the highway, fingertips tapping idly on the wheel, and Pat settles back and stares out the window.

After a minute or two of silence, Johnny says, “Hey, you have an English test today, don’t you?”


“No, like, you know. After the other night. When we did it,” he clarifies, casting Johnny a significant look.

Johnny just watches the road. “Oh, yeah. I mean no, I don’t really feel any different, I dunno. How do you mean?”

In his peripheral vision, Johnny can see Pat’s expression go from gleeful to...something else. Shuttered the way he gets when he’s blowing off a shitty game. He just says, “I don’t know, man. Nevermind.”

Johnny looks at him, frowning slightly, and reaches over the emergency brake to take Pat’s hand, curling their fingers loosely together. “It was good,” he says.
Pat’s expression softens. He says, “Yeah, it was.” He pauses, blushing. “I um. I can still kinda feel it.”

“Does it hurt?” Johnny asks quickly. “Shit, Pat, I didn’t wanna--”

“Good hurt,” Pat says over him, cutting him off before Johnny can start apologizing for anything. “The best kind of hurt. I don’t want it to go away.”

They pull into the school lot and Johnny finds a space. He shuts the engine off but leaves the keys in the ignition, leaning back over to kiss Pat again, slow and deep this time, and enough to have Pat melting into him, clinging, moaning into his mouth and tasting of bitter coffee and a hint of toothpaste.

“We should, uh,” Johnny mumbles around Pat sucking on his bottom lip, and Pat hums in agreement, but doesn’t stop. A second later, though, something slams down on the hood in front of them, making them jerk apart.

“For fuck’s sake,” Pat yells, glaring at Carbomb’s grinning face, where he’s leering at them through the windshield, and Johnny shouts, “Dude! Not the truck!”

Dan ignores this and yanks Pat’s door open, grabbing his bag for him as Pat slides out with his coffee. “Bros, I love you, but no way do you want to be sucking face in front of the admin office. You really want to get a detention because somebody saw you making out in school?”

"Technically, we're not in the school yet," Johnny says flatly, sliding out himself.

Pat snorts. "We can *kiss*, Dan,” he says, in his best authoritative tone, which isn’t terribly convincing. "All students are allowed to display non-lewd affection." He grins over at Johnny. "You want to non-lewd affection me, babe?"

Johnny rolls his eyes, pulling a face as he locks the truck. “Maybe later, *babe*. We gotta get to pre-calc.” He nods to Dan, who falls into step beside them.

“Yeah, yeah, fun-ruiner,” Pat gripes. But he leans up on tiptoe to smack a last kiss on Johnny’s cheek before taking off for US Gov.

Dan slings his backpack onto both shoulders as they navigate through the crowded corridors. He grins. "You guys are just heartwarming, you know that?"

"Shut your face," says Johnny.

Dan just beams bigger, leaning against the wall and waiting for Johnny to get his books out. "So this is none of my business," he starts, "but seeing as how I’m your confidant and all, I feel like I can ask."

Johnny glares at him levelly. “My confidant.”

“You talk to anybody else about stuff?” Dan asks.

Johnny takes off for class without waiting, but Dan matches pace. “Define ‘stuff’.”

“I was just wondering,” Dan says, shifting his armload of books out of the way as a small horde of freshmen troop past, “if stuff is cool between you and Pat? You guys have been all…” He waves his hands vaguely and Johnny just stares at him, refusing to do him any favors.
“All...what?”

“I dunno.” Dan looks like he’s beginning to regret bringing this topic up at all. Good. “You guys pick at each other like crazy, you were telling me how you guys don’t talk about stuff and things are messed up, and then suddenly shit’s all back to normal and you’re mounting each other in the parking lot.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Don’t you have any hobbies besides psychoanalyzing my love life?”

For a moment Dan’s face softens, but then he seems to collect himself. “Psychoanalyze what, exactly? Dude, you guys suck at subtle.”

Johnny shoots him an unamused glance as they take their seats, but he shrugs. “Stuff’s fine, I guess. I mean, better than fine, I think.” He smiles a little, in spite of himself.

“Aw, look at you,” Dan says, beaming. “You’re all gooey about it! That’s cute as shit.” He leans over and punches Johnny in the arm. “Cute as shit, man.”

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When Johnny finally gets home after practice later, he stumbles into the house, drops his gear bag in the hall, and beelines for the kitchen, nearly running headlong into his brother.

“Uh,” says Johnny, “what the fuck are you doing here?”

David raises his eyebrows. “I live here, douche,” he says around a mouthful of banana. “Last I checked, my room wasn’t rented out. Why the fuck haven’t you answered any of my texts?”

“No seriously,” Johnny persists, “are you in trouble or something? Why are you home, do Mom and Dad know you’re here?”

“Yes, they do,” David says, tossing his banana peel in the rubbish and hopping up to sit on the counter, heels knocking loudly against the cabinet doors below as Johnny starts rummaging for sandwich ingredients. “There’s a parent teacher conference thing tonight and I caught a ride home to have dinner, and then Mom and Dad are gonna drop me back at school when they go in for the meeting later. Which,” he adds pointedly, “you would know if you answered a text message, like, fucking ever. Breaking up with Pat’s gotta suck, especially since you play together, but c’mon, man.”

Johnny goes still, mustardy knife poised over a slice of bread, and bites his lip. “We’re not broken up,” he says, so quiet he’s surprised David hears him and snorts incredulously.

“What the fuck?” He sounds so genuinely pissed that Johnny actually looks up sharply, meeting David’s angry gaze. “You’re kidding. After he fooled around on you?”

“It’s.” Johnny cuts himself off, waffling over his words. Suddenly food seems a lot less appealing. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“I dunno, seems pretty simple to me,” David says, heels resuming their distracted thud-thud against the cabinet doors and setting Johnny’s teeth on edge. “Did you guys talk it out or some shit?”

Johnny sucks his bottom lip for a long moment before shaking his head. “Nah, I dunno. Stuff just kinda evened out and it didn’t seem worth starting shit over.” He hears the words as he says them, and studies his hands intently as a prickling discomfort that feels a lot like shame washes through him. “I know how stupid it sounds,” he adds quickly, and David gives a derisive snort of agreement,
“but I can’t just, I mean. I don’t want to let shit just fall apart because of one dumb drunk mistake he doesn’t even know I know about.”

“He doesn’t--” David cuts himself off and shakes his head. “Dude, this does not sound like you.”

“I know,” says Johnny quietly, giving up on his sandwich and leaning back against the counter, facing David. “And like, Mom and Dad are all over me to get college apps in, and get my shit together, and I think Pat knows that, and he’s sorta freaking out.”

“Oh my god, please don’t tell me you’re still trying to take responsibility for that little shithead messing around behind your back,” David groans, leaning back and knocking the toaster over with a clatter. “He’s being a dick and you don’t need to keep making excuses for him.”

Even as David says this, Johnny can feel his hackles rising, ready to defend Pat without a second thought like always, and he kind of wants to punch himself in the face a little.

“I’m not making excuses,” he says, even though they both know what a crock of shit that is. “I’m just saying, I think things are getting better. We um.” His cheeks go hot and he looks away again. “We did it last weekend. Like, for the first time, and it was...it was good.”

The look of horror on David’s face would be hilarious under pretty much any other circumstances. “Ew,” he says, vehemently. “No offense, bro, but fucking ew. Like, I’m down with you dating whoever, you know that, but I do not need to know about-- about. Yeah, ew. No.”

“Real mature,” Johnny tells him.

“You’re my brother,” David states, like this explains everything. “I am not supposed to know about what you do with your dick.”

“That so was not the point,” Johnny tries weakly, but it’s hard to argue with the ready-made excuse to just let this whole thing drop. “But hey,” he says finally, “thanks.”

“Duh,” says David, but he sounds fond when he adds, “fucking idiot.”

Johnny chuckles a dish towel at him.

Having David back for dinner is a welcome distraction, his mother clucking over the two of them in a routine sort of way that Johnny hadn’t realized he missed. Before they head back to Consol for the conference, David hugs Johnny and mutters, “Seriously, answer your goddamn texts, okay?”

Johnny gives his shoulders a squeeze and says, “Okay, yeah. Sorry.”

David smiles lopsidedly at him for a moment before heading out to the car, bookbag slung over his shoulder, and leaving Johnny to wonder when his dorky little brother had turned into a person without his noticing.

Johnny hears David’s words echoing through his head throughout the rest of the week, though; sees afterimages of his disapproving, incredulous stare when Johnny had told him about Pat. David’s reaction had given voice to so many of Johnny’s own unformed thoughts. He’s not stupid, knows he’s being a sucker, and it makes his skin crawl, with the simultaneous urges to push Pat off, to put space between them, and to just wrap around him and never, ever let go.
It’s late when practice finally lets out, and Geno skips the showers in favor of just toweling his hair off and changing, ready to head home. He makes it as far as the dressing room door before Tanner Glass is hurrying to catch up, still halfway through tugging his t-shirt over his head.

“Geno! G, wait up.” He straightens his shirt out and falls into step beside Geno. “Hey, I need a favor.”

“Sure,” says Geno, bumping their shoulders together. His car is right out behind the rink, and he drops his gear bag on the curb, fumbling one-handed for his keys until Tanner takes his sticks from him.

“Okay, so I know it’s kind of a pain in the ass, because you live on the other side of town, but I have a prescription for my allergy meds waiting at the Walgreens down on Foster and Lake, and Duper was gonna drive me, but then practice was late and he has to be home by six.” He blurts this all out in a rush, and then fixes Geno with an almost comically hopeful look. Then he sneezes.

“Bless you,” says Geno, finally digging out his keys and unlocking the hatchback for his bag. “I drive. Is no problem.”

“You sure?” Tanner asks dubiously, but he gets in when Geno leans over to unlock the passenger side door. “I mean, thanks man. I could hardly breathe during practice today.”

Denis and their mother are closing the restaurant tonight, and as much as Geno wants to go home and collapse, he also really doesn’t want to go home and spend the evening listening to his dad wax poetic about the Russian government. Probably capped off with another bid for Geno to help convince his mother and Denis to move back there.

“I’m sure,” Geno tells him decisively. “Very sure. You stop breathing, things get very complicated. Complicated not good this early in the season.”

Tanner laughs, ducking his head sheepishly. “Thanks, man. I’ll chip in for gas or whatever, if you need it.”

Waving him off, Geno pulls out onto the main road. It’s a gloomy, slate-grey evening, and the headlights of passing cars give the sheen of drizzle on the tarmac a strange, yellowish glow in the last minutes of daylight.

They drive in companionable silence for a couple of minutes before Tanner says, “You didn’t come out with us last week.” Geno hums in affirmation, but doesn’t offer more. Tanner frowns. “Everything cool?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” Geno asks, as airily as he can manage.

Tanner shrugs. “Dunno. That’s why I’m asking.”

Geno grunts noncommittally and keeps driving.

“Is it because of that Bergeron kid?” Tanner blurts, and when Geno glances over, he’s got the fierce,
defiant look that he usually wears right before he gets himself landed in the penalty box. “Because I swear, if he’s—”

“He not making me stay home,” Geno says, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, no,” Tanner concedes, “but still. That whole situation was fucked up, and I don’t want you thinking we don’t have your back.”

“No trouble,” Geno tells him waringly. “This what I try to avoid, other people getting involved, starting trouble for Consol.”

“No, I know all that,” Tanner says, still a little hesitant. Geno can hear him shifting around in his seat. “I think I was just surprised, is all. You never really do that kind of stuff, so I was wondering if you were, like. Cool, I guess. I’m not trying to pry,” he adds, “but I know you got the captain thing kind of thrown at you, and I think the guys were all so glad you got it, none of us really thought about how much pressure you’d be under.”

“Mm,” Geno says, watching the road. He’d been afraid of something like this at the beginning of the season, some of the guys treating him in the Captain’s position with extra caution, just because of the language barrier. “I do just fine. Not needing babysitter.”

Tanner visibly flinches back. “Sorry,” he says quietly. “I didn’t mean—”

“No, no, sorry, too,” Geno says quickly. He tries to rearrange his face into something other than a scowl, but the confused, anxious nerves he’s been trying to distract himself from for weeks are back. “Sorry, need to work on my temper, maybe.”

“Eh,” Tanner says, grinning. “Maybe letting it out a little more here and there would do you some good, so long as you’re taking it out on the enemy. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Bergeron get pissed like that before, it was kind of funny to watch him try to knock you down.”

He mimics craning up, trying to punch something way above his head, and Geno snorts a laugh before he can help himself.

“I don’t think he’s that much smaller,” he says, biting his lip. He thinks about the way Bergeron had leaned into him on Halloween. Looked up at him in the moment before they kissed; dry brush of lips, the surge of nerves urging him to press in for more. He blurs out, “What you know about Bergeron?”

“What do I know about him?” Tanner echoes, and Geno nods. “What do you mean? Like, about his play? Probably nothing you don’t already know yourself. He’s not really much of a fighter, either, especially for being on Causeway. He’s good at faceoffs. I think he had a couple injuries last year, but I didn’t really hear much else. Why?”

“No, I mean,” Geno sighs frustratedly, “I mean...He seems like not a bad person. Good captain, good friend.”

“Sure.” Geno can practically feel Tanner’s confused stare on him as they turn into the Walgreens parking lot. “I don’t think he’s a bad guy, no. I mean, nobody seems to have anything bad to say about him, except for how he keeps trying to rearrange your face.”

Geno laughs hollowly and parks the car. “Except for that.”

Geno uses the few minutes it takes for Tanner to get his prescription filled to buy himself a Vitamin Water, chugging half of it in one go as he wanders back over to the pharmacy counter.
“Can I get some of that?” Tanner asks, reaching. He uses it to wash down one of the pills, sighing gratefully and passing the bottle back to Geno. “Holy fuck, if I can go to sleep breathing through my nose tonight, I will be so happy.”

They’re only on the road for a minute or two, Tanner chatting happily about some band he’s going to see out near MTL with Paulie and Duper in a couple of weeks, when Geno cuts across him.

“If I tell you secret, you don’t tell anybody else, yes?”

Tanner breaks off mid sentence. “Yeah, dude, of course. What’s up?”

Geno swallows. He just downed that whole bottle of Vitamin Water, but all of a sudden his throat feels parched and tight. This is a terrible idea. It might be a really, really terrible idea. But on the other hand, he knows Tanner, and trusts him, and if he’s going to talk about this with anybody, it probably ought to be the guy who punched an opposing team member in the face last season for using *fag* as a slur during a game.

“Is about Bergeron,” he says finally. “Um.” He licks his lips, trying to figure out what he wants to say, and the right way to say it. “Last time we fight, was at Halloween party.”

“Yeah,” Tanner says quietly. “I heard. The guys said you all had to book it out of there pretty fast.”

“Guys are dramatic,” Geno says stalwartly. “Wasn’t that bad.”

Tanner laughs, but sobered quickly, leaning back in his seat and prompting, “Okay, so then, what?”

Before Geno can change his mind, he blurts out, “We kiss.”

“You.” Tanner breaks off, eyes going huge. “You kissed. You and Bergeron?”

Looking very intently at the road ahead of them, Geno nods once.

“On *purpose*?”

Geno glares straight ahead over the steering wheel.

“Woah,” Tanner says, and then quickly, “I mean. Sorry. So wait, were you guys like, a thing?”

“No,” Geno says, vehemently. “No, no. Was first time. *Only* time. We run into each other, talk, try to make…” he trails off, searching for the right word. “Truce. We try and make truce. No more fighting. We talk about,” he waves a hand over the steering wheel vaguely, “stupid things. Cartoons. I think, maybe he not terrible after all.”

“And then you kissed?” Tanner asks, flabbergasted. Then he seems to shake himself and says again, in a valiant attempt at a matter of fact tone, “And then you kissed.”

“Then we kissed,” Geno confirms, doing his very best to sound resolute, and not at all like he kind of wants to barf, and maybe punch himself in the face for ever bringing this up.

Tanner waits a beat. Geno can feel his gaze even in the dark car interior. “And then what?”

Geno shrugs. “Then we fight again.”

“Just like that?”

“Like that,” says Geno, snapping his fingers for emphasis. “Don’t even know why, really. First
talking, then kissing, then he say kissing is bad idea, then we get mad and fight.”

“Sounds like stopping was the bad idea,” Tanner says, and Geno can hear a smirk in his voice. “If you guys talking only ever leads to hitting. Maybe some kissing would do you both some good.”

“So funny,” Geno grumbles.

“I’m just saying.” Tanner says airily. “So what, was that it? You fight, you kiss, you fight some more, and now you’re done?”

“What do you mean?” Geno asks, tentatively. “What else should there be?”

“I mean,” Tanner says, hesitating, “is that all you wanted? You aren’t actually interested in more. Interested in him.”

“Oh,” Geno starts, and then pauses. The of course not he’d been so ready with just seconds ago dies on his tongue. Instead, he hears himself say, “I don’t know.”

“I didn’t even know you were into guys,” Tanner says, thoughtfully.

“I’m not,” Geno says quickly, because that’s the truth. Or, always has been, before. “I mean, I wasn’t. I never even thought about…” he trails off, waving a hand to indicate what, he isn’t entirely sure. “Why, have you?”


“Is just weird,” he says instead, quietly, almost to himself. “I never even think about it before it happen.”

“But you do now,” Tanner says, and it’s not a question.

Geno pulls up in the dorm parking lot, double-parking along the curb and letting the engine idle. He hesitates. “Maybe.”

“You do, or we wouldn’t be having this conversation,” says Tanner, wisely. Geno strongly considers confiscating his allergy meds and flinging them across the nearby soccer field.

“Smartass,” he grumbles, instead.

Tanner smiles winningly, reaching behind himself to collect his bag from the backseat. “Sure,” he agrees. “But I also think that if you wanna keep kissing dudes, you can do better than someone who keeps punching you in the face. Just food for thought.”

“Maybe we learn to stop fighting,” Geno says defiantly. “Maybe he like me so much, has to keep fighting as distraction.”

“There you go, G,” Tanner says, laughing as he slides out of the car. “You’ve got that kid right where you want him.”

“Ha ha,” Geno snipes back, but then adds, “um, please keep secret?”

“Yeah, man.” Tanner leans back in through the open passenger door, frowning slightly. “You know I’d never spread this stuff around. But you also know that the rest of the team, I mean, I don’t think they’d have a problem with you kissing dudes.” He pauses, and then amends, “Okay, maybe not Causeway dudes.”
“Goodnight, Glasser,” Geno says, rolling his eyes. He lets the car roll forward a couple feet without warning, so Tanner has to jump back and push the door shut with a surprised yelp.

“Douche,” he calls, jogging to keep up as Geno rounds the corner for the exit. “See if I ever give you advice again!”

Geno can see him still shaking his fist and laughing, lit red in the glow of the tail lights as he pulls out of the parking lot and off towards home.

Chapter End Notes

Comments welcome, y'all. :)

December: Patrice

Chapter Notes

Shoutout to everyone having as much fun reading along as I am posting this! :) For serious, it's kinda the greatest to see y'all enjoying it.

This next one's for all my Boston fans out there. Stay real.

*cues slow-jam*

After the frenzied first couple months of the season, and of his captaincy, the first time Patrice finds himself not panicking after a loss is weird.

“We played good, but they played better,” Krug says simply, taking a draw off the joint he has pinched between his thumb and forefinger. He holds the smoke in, finally letting it out in a slow whoosh that rises indistinguishable from the vapor of his breath in the chilly night air. “They got some lucky breaks.”

“Ice was tilted in their direction,” Thorty agrees wisely, taking the joint when Krug holds it out for him.

On Patrice’s other side, Marchy smirks. “Shit, man. It almost felt like charity. Letting Edmonton take us five to three? Poor kids.”

“Especially after what Consol did to them last week,” Krug adds.

Patrice elbows Marchy, taking a sip of his beer and shivering as the cold liquid chills him from the inside, even under his thick coat. “Don’t let Coach hear you say that. Hey, have any of you guys heard from Tuukks? I know Coach talked to him, but I think he was still pretty pissed when he left the rink.”

“Nah,” Thorty says, exhaling smoke. “But I saw Khu earlier. Said Tuukks is fine, just being a snarky asshole, probably holed up in his room playing video games by now. He’ll be fine.” He offers the joint to Patrice, who waves it off, and Marchy reaches past him to take it instead.

It’s a lazy post-game night, collective energy of the party at about half of what it could be. This is probably for the best, since Patrice has counted guys from at least four or five school teams wandering around in various states of intoxication, occasionally chirping and heckling, but nobody really seems in the mood to start problems.

He belches comfortably, flopping over against Marchy’s side. His beer bottle feels tragically empty, but he’s too boneless and comfortable to do anything about it for the moment.

“You sure you wanna pass?” Marchy asks, offering the tail end of the smoldering joint, and for a moment Patrice considers, but then he shakes his head. Or, he tries. Mostly he just lolls more heavily against Marchy’s shoulder.

“No thanks. Someone’s gotta set a good example for you kids.”
“Right, Bergy,” Krug says, voice breaking with a squeaky giggle. “How many beers would it take me to catch up to you right now?”

Patrice shoves him in the arm, or tries, missing by a mile and just making Krug giggle harder. “Whatever, dickslap. I’m not driving, I can do what I want.”

“How many beers are you asking me?” Patrice asks, setting up a little bit to drain what’s left of his beer, letting the bottle slip from his fingers into the manicured grass below his feet with a soft thud.

Thorty gives him a level stare. “Uh, because you’re friends with them.”

“I’m friends with, like, two of them,” Patrice snorts, but he pushes off the wall, getting tentatively to his feet. “Whatever, gimme your cup. I’ll get your refill. I need a fresh beer, anyway. Also you suck,” he adds, as a decisive afterthought.

“How do I suck?” Thorty demands to Patrice’s already retreating back. “You said you wanted another, anyway. And it’s Jack and Coke, asshole! None of that bitch booze shit.”

Thorty just waves Thorty’s empty cup over his head in mock salute, heading toward the house where the general party din quickly drowns out Marchy’s cackling laughter.

He’s not even sure whose house this is. He had just gotten an invite via text from Johnny, with an address and a polite request not to start shit. Smartass Johnny Toews can suck a bag of dicks.

It’s only then that it occurs to him to wonder where Johnny even is. Patrice hasn’t seen him since they showed up, but the house is pretty big and there are tons of people milling around everywhere. One tall white dude in this place could be pretty easy to miss.

It takes him a moment, once he reaches the kitchen, to remember why he’s there. It’s a complete disaster, bottles and cans and bags of chips scattered on every surface, and the floor sticky underfoot.

He has to say, “Um, excuse me,” at least five times before a tall guy in a MadTech basketball letter jacket notices him, staring down his nose at Patrice a couple of seconds and finally moving out of the way of the cooler. There are a couple Cokes left and Patrice grabs one, glaring back at the enormous basketball guy, not paying attention when he pops the tab and the can sprays everywhere.

The basketball guy practically has tears in his eyes laughing by the time Patrice manages to dump the offending can into the nearby sink and jump back. He also seems to have conjured some friends out of nowhere to help bear witness, and they only laugh harder when Patrice glares at them.

“You wanna maybe pass me a paper towel or something?” he snaps, waving at the roll out of reach behind Tall Guy’s shoulder. “I mean, I’m really fucking glad you’re entertained and everything, but come on.”

The guy wheezes, clutching his sides. “Little man, you’re gonna need a lot more than a paper towel. I think there’s a laundry room down there, though,” he points, and his friends crack up again, even harder. “Maybe that’ll get you sorted out.”

“Wow.” Patrice rolls his eyes, smiling sarcastically and trying to retain as much composure as he can, while covered in a dark, wet, sticky mess. “Real helpful. Thanks.”
He turns and trudges from the kitchen, and, for lack of a better option, in the direction the guy had pointed. Sure enough, an open door down the mostly-vacant hallway reveals a cramped little laundry room, with a sink in one corner.

Pushing the door most of the way shut behind him, Patrice unbuttons his soggy shirt and peels it off, regarding it sadly. He’d liked this shirt, dark blue and fitted, a gift for his last birthday from his aunt, and he isn’t ready to just throw it out.

He’s standing over the big plastic sink, starting the tedious process of rinsing the Coke stains out, when the door swings back open and Malkin is standing there with a beer in each hand and a weirdly pensive expression on his face.

“Um,” says Patrice, hands stilling as he fights the urge to back up against the back wall, feeling suddenly very, very trapped. “Hi.”

“Brought you this,” Malkin says stiffly, holding out one of the beers. Then, by way of explanation when Patrice doesn’t move, “I see what happen, see you go here.” He nods at the wet shirt that Patrice is still holding and asks, “Shirt okay?”

“I don’t know,” Patrice says, feeling just as stiff as Malkin looks and still fighting every impulse to push past him and escape. “I think it’ll be fine.”

Malkin makes what Patrice has to assume is an attempt at smiling, but he still looks edgy and wrong-footed, taking up way too much of the doorway for Patrice’s comfort.

As if he can read Patrice’s thoughts in his expression, Malkin shifts sideways quickly, ducking just inside the doorway to leave more of a gap. He smiles again, for real this time, and holds the beer out for Patrice to take.

“Basketball guy was douche,” he says decisively, accent rolling pleasantly through the rounded syllables and making Patrice want to smile back, in spite of himself. “Take this. You need.”

Patrice laughs a little, and finally reaches out and takes the offered bottle. “Thanks,” he says quietly, and something in Malkin’s expression softens. “Shit, do I really look that bad?”

Malkin takes a second too long to answer, eyes flicking up and down Patrice’s body and making him feel suddenly very exposed, standing there in just his undershirt. His coat is still where he left it, tossed onto the washer, and he has the irrational desire to grab it and tug it back on. “Not look bad,” Malkin says finally, and something in his voice makes Patrice’s cheeks flush warm.

Patrice takes a swig of beer just to distract himself, setting it down on the washer next to him and turning to wring out his soaked shirt over the sink. “Cool,” he says, lamely.

“Been thinking a lot since Halloween,” Malkin says, a little too loudly, and Patrice freezes. He waits expectantly, but Malkin breaks off, seemingly having trouble finding his words.

“Me too,” Patrice says, finally, when the silence goes on too long. He fully intends to continue with something about how dumb it had all been, about how he’s perfectly happy for them to just stay out of each other’s ways from now on and forget the whole thing, but Malkin seems to find himself again.

“Think we should kiss again,” Malkin blurts, and then looks intensely mortified.

Patrice stares at him. “I,” he stammers, licking suddenly dry lips and painfully aware, even in all the confusion clamoring around his brain, of the way Malkin’s eyes follow the movement. “*Huh*?”
Malkin shifts, looking suddenly defensive. “Was good last time,” he mutters, eyes darting away in an almost comical show of self consciousness. “For a minute.”

“Last time I hit you,” is all Patrice can think to say. Or rather, the words are out of his mouth before his brain has a chance to catch up. “We ended up fighting.”

“Before that, though,” Malkin starts, and then cuts himself off, looking more frustrated than anything. “Is fine, sorry, forget I talk about it.”

He turns hurriedly to leave, like he’s expecting the hitting to start back up again, even when Patrice is stuck to the spot, mouth still hanging halfway open.

He shuts it, swallows, and says, “I liked it, too.”

The words are so quiet coming out of his mouth that he’s surprised when Malkin pauses and turns back to look at him. “Yeah?” he asks, and his face is like the sun breaking through a cloudbank, bright and clear and unabashed.

Patrice shrugs, glancing down at the ground, at the row of detergents on the shelf against the far wall, at the condensation pooling around the base of his beer on the washer lid. Anywhere but at Malkin. “Yeah,” he says. “I think so.”

When he looks up again, Malkin has moved a step closer. Patrice looks up at his face, at the lingering glow of him, the way the corners of his eyes crinkle as his mouth curls in a smile when Patrice’s eyes meet his. He’s never properly appreciated how tall Malkin is.

“Maybe you should shut the door,” Patrice says, quietly.

Malkin grins, reaching behind himself to push the door the rest of the way shut with a quiet click that sends a burst of nerves jittering suddenly down Patrice’s spine, to settle in the pit of his belly. This is probably a really, really bad idea. Terrible, even.

“We can’t fight again,” he says, blood hammering in his ears. “No matter what, we can’t hit each other.”

“Tired of hitting,” Malkin agrees.

Patrice moves forward and Malkin leans to meet him, and there it is again, the hesitant brush of lips, the pause, the deeper press on the second pass. The break between the two is quicker this time, Patrice’s lips parting of their own accord.

Malkin’s hand finds Patrice’s hip, and slides up. It’s slow and steady and purposeful, shifting Patrice’s thin cotton undershirt aside until his cool fingers find bare skin.

It’s possible that Patrice is more drunk than he’d thought. Or maybe it’s the nerves, or the heat of this stuffy little room, or his brain still catching up with the situation, trying to make sense of it, but he feels like he’s spinning. Out of himself, out of control, and in the heady buzz of it he finds himself pressed to Malkin, fingers clinging tightly to the soft folds of his Consol hoodie.

Malkin’s arms are around him almost reflexively, enveloping him until they’re fitted together and Patrice nearly overbalances backwards into the washer. He laughs, a little hysterically, and Malkin laughs, too; a low rumble Patrice can feel in his own chest. His mouth is soft against Patrice’s, with an inquisitive tongue and a sharp press of teeth that finds Patrice’s lower lip, drawing out a moan that he has to work to stifle.
He gives Malkin’s lip a nip in retaliation, and Malkin clearly has no qualms about making noise, because he groans, and suddenly Patrice is intimately aware of the serious hard-on pressed up tight against his thigh. The thrill of nerves coiling through him gives a surge, and after only a moment’s deliberation he slips one of his legs between Malkin’s, rutting his thigh over the stretched denim bulge of Malkin’s dick.

Their kisses get sloppier, as they grind off against each other. Patrice’s own dark grey skinny jeans are feeling uncomfortably tight, and it’s all he can do to scramble and press for friction, pressure, anything he can get. Malkin’s hands on his ass come as a welcome surprise, fingers digging in to drag him closer, nearly lifting him off the floor.

The frenzy of it, the frenetic rhythm of their bodies, the clutching fingers and clacking teeth, the pounding of his heart in his ears, all pull Patrice inexorably back to more familiar habits. The weight of their bodies pressed and tangled, but this time for different purpose and so, so much better than heavy fists and blood and bruises.

Against Patrice’s lips, Malkin’s mouth goes slack. Patrice opens his eyes with Malkin’s heavy, quick breaths against his cheek and meets wide, dark, glassy eyes inches from his own. For a long moment, they simply look at each other, and then Malkin shifts and Patrice’s hips stutter up of their own accord. Malkin’s gaze snaps back to focus.

“Um, you want me to..?” he asks, lifting a hand and glancing at Patrice’s crotch in obvious question, but Patrice just shakes his head hurriedly, leaning up to kiss him again.

“Nah, nah, just, um. Like you were doing, with your hands, uh. On my ass?”

Malkin laughs and then looks mildly abashed at the way Patrice’s eyes narrow. Patrice’s cheeks are flushed hot, but Malkin seems to have no problem fulfilling the request.

It’s blessed, wonderful friction that sets off sparks behind Patrice’s eyes. Maybe later he’ll be self conscious about coming in his pants, without even a hand on his dick, but now all he cares about is Malkin’s mouth, hot and wet against his throat, and Malkin’s hands roaming, exploring lower. Helping pull him up tight with steady rhythm.

When he finally comes, those hands are ready to catch him and hold him up, and he sags forward gratefully, panting into Malkin’s neck.

“Fuck,” he half groans, half laughs, slurred against Malkin’s sweaty skin. “I mean, just. Fuck.”

“You know,” says Malkin, “for good Canadian boy, you have filthy mouth.”

For lack of a better option, Patrice bites him.

Malkin yelps, laughing. “I thought you said we be nice now,” he says, even as his hand finds the back of Patrice’s neck and gives it an experimental sort of pat. “That not very nice.”

Patrice bites again, but gentler this time, sucking over the mark while Malkin’s fingers scratch through his hair.

“I’m nice,” he says, finally pulling back to look up into Malkin’s amused face. “I’m very nice. I just let you hump my leg against a washing machine.” He reaches back and retrieves his beer, taking a long swig. “You’re kind of nice, too.”

An array of expressions flit across Malkin’s face, the corners of his mouth twitching. “You kind of drunk,” he says.
“You aren’t?” Patrice downs another couple gulps of his beer, like this is going to somehow help him in any way.

“I drink tonight, but we Russians have much better, um,” Malkin breaks off, waving a hand impatiently as he fumbles the word. Patrice smirks.

“Tolerance?”

“Yes,” agrees Malkin, stalwartly. “This is word I mean.”

“Right,” says Patrice, taking a couple of tries but finally managing to hop up and sit on the washer without sliding off. He swings his heels against the metal with a satisfying series of hollow thuds. “Well, I’m Quebecois, and I think I could drink your Russian ass under a table any day of the week.”

“Maybe next time we see about that,” Malkin says, with a sly grin. He moves in and pushes Patrice’s knees apart, insinuating himself between them and leaning up to catch Patrice’s mouth with his own. “I think French thing only hurt your chances.”

“Quebecois,” Patrice says again, haughtily. “My parents are from Montreal, we moved when I was five.” He pauses, and draws back. “Next time?”

That fleeting, self conscious look flits back across Malkin’s face, and he juts his chin out, shrugging. “You not want next time?”

“I…”

To be perfectly honest, Patrice had never even considered a this time, until about twenty minutes ago. He’s still having enough trouble making sense of the cooling mess in his pants, and his apparent newfound fascination with the way Malkin’s mouth gets all red and full after they kiss.

“I uh. I mean,” he stammers. “This was fun.”

Malkin’s face falls. He makes a quick recovery, elapsed turnaround time of only a second or two, but even in his hazy state Patrice can read the slump of his shoulders, the way he draws in upon himself. “Oh,” he says, in an admirable attempt at nonchalance. “Yes, was fun.”

Patrice swings out a foot, nudging him in the thigh. “No,” he says quickly, “I just mean, yeah, it was fun. I just, like. I dunno. Can this not be, like, a big deal?” He waves his hands vaguely, shrugging.

“I not make big deal if you not,” Malkin says simply. “Teams not need to know.”

“Exactly,” Patrice agrees. He’s warming to this concept much, much more quickly than he ever would have thought. “Just between us?”

“Right,” says Malkin.

“Cool,” says Patrice. He tips his head back and downs the dregs of his beer. “Then there should totally be a next time. And I will drink your ass under the fucking table.”

“You talk big game,” Malkin says, but he grins and kisses Patrice again. It’s deep and thorough and a little more heavy on the tongue than Patrice usually prefers, but he can’t seem to help the way he opens up for it; how his body kind of zings, and his heart beats out a thunderous tattoo against his ribs.

They make out like that for a few more minutes, Patrice’s legs coming up seemingly of their own
accord to wrap around Malkin’s waist. There’s nothing frantic about it now, and everything around them is a warm, comfortable blur until something thunks loudly against the laundry room door, followed by muffled drunken laughter.

“Shit,” Patrice hisses, sitting back and groping for his phone to check the time. “Shit, shit, I told Thorty I was gonna get him another drink like, forty minutes ago.”

“Oh,” Patrice falters, not really wanting to seem like he’s trying to bolt, but at the same time not wanting Marchy and the others to have enough time to send out a search party. Provided they haven’t already. “Well I, um.”

“Is okay,” Malkin says, with a wry little smile. “You go find friends.”

Patrice slides off the washer, Malkin’s hand coming up reflexively to steady him. His messed up shirt is still in a soggy pile in the sink basin, and he wrings it out as best he can, stuffing it unceremoniously into the pocket of his coat. “So uh,” he starts hesitantly. “I’ll catch you later, Malkin.”

“Geno,” says Malkin, and for a moment Patrice looks at him quizzically, not understanding. Malkin rolls his eyes, laughing. “My name Evgeni, friends say Geno,” he explains, and Patrice feels his cheeks go hot.


“What does that mean?” Patrice demands, laughing, but Malkin--Geno--just shakes his head.

“Just mean it suit you,” he says, and then leans in to press a quick, decisive peck on Patrice’s lips. One that feels much less charged, and much more...European.

Patrice giggles, in spite of himself, backing towards the door. “Fine. I’ll catch you later, Geno.”

Geno just grins.

Patrice hurries back to the kitchen, which is now mercifully devoid of all asshole basketball players, and fixes Thorty’s Jack and Coke before hustling back outside in search of his friends.

They are, somewhat predictably, exactly where he left them.

“Sorry that took so long,” he says, handing off the cup to Thorty and squeezing in where Krug and Marchy have gravitated closer together, sharing another joint. The mess in his pants is cool and uncomfortably sticky now, and he tries his best to shift without anyone noticing. “It was crazy in there.”

“Didn’t feel too long,” says Marchy vaguely. This time when he offers Patrice the blunt, Patrice accepts, taking one long hit before passing it off to Krug.
He coughs, exhaling a cloud of smoke. “Glad to know I was missed.”

“You didn’t get into it with that Consol fucker again, did you?” Thorty asks, suddenly stern. He leans forward with narrowed eyes, inspecting Patrice in the low light filtering out from the house.

“No!” Patrice says firmly, and then again, “No, dude. I got soda all over myself trying to make your stupid drink, some Madison Tech basketball losers gave me shit, and I went into the laundry room to rinse off. No fighting at all, I promise.” Technically, he thinks, every word of that is true. He even tugs the sodden corner of his shirt out of his jacket pocket as evidence.

Thorty glances down at it, taking a sip of his drink before giving Patrice a satisfied nod. “Cool,” he says. Patrice glares at him.

“So glad I pass your inspection.”

“Awww,” Krug coos, finally piping up and wafting a cloud of smoke past Patrice’s face. “Look at that, Berg. You’re growing as a person!”

Patrice punches him in the arm, and Krug yelps, only barely managing to save the joint from being lost in the grass.

“Clearly he hasn’t grown that much,” Marchy snickers. “Always so violent. Why the rage, man? Make love, not war.”

“Ugh,” says Patrice, casting Marchy what he hopes is more a withering glare, less the half-drunk squint that it feels like. “Where the hell is Barty and his car keys? I think I’ve had enough of you losers for one night.”

“Ugh,” Marchy mimics him, and Krug doubles over giggling, chiming in.

“Ugh, ugh, ugh.”
“Hi,” says Johnny, as Pat climbs into the cab with his backpack and the usual travel mugs. Johnny takes his, and leans in for a kiss. 

“Hey,” says Pat, once they break apart. “You look happy this morning, and weirdly awake. What’s up?”

Johnny takes a gulp of coffee before pulling off the curb and heading for the main road out of Pat’s subdivision. “Okay, so you know how I’ve been trying to get on the early admit list for Southern?”

“What?” says Pat. “No. Early admit list?”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Dude, I swear I’ve mentioned it like, fifty times. Yeah, I’m trying to see if I can get on the early admit list, so I’ll have an easier chance at getting shortlisted for their incoming freshman training camp over the summer. They do a week where they let prospective guys train with the incoming class. We didn’t talk about this?”

“Uh, no,” Pat says again. “No I think I would have remembered that.” He hesitates. “So, how many slots are available, do you think?”

“Not very many,” Johnny says, but when Pat’s face falls he quickly adds, “but hey, if you want to try doing early apps, too, I can totally help you out!”

“Thanks,” says Pat, although he doesn’t sound terribly enthusiastic. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Hey, it would be great, right?” Johnny tries, reaching over to squeeze Pat’s wrist. “Like before freshman year, at the summer training combine where we met.”

Pat just nods.

“Anyway,” Johnny says, refusing to let his good mood waver, “I sent in the early admit application last weekend, and this morning their assistant coach emailed me! He wants to send out a scout to Madison Tech. How fucking cool is that?”


“Dude, any scout they send won’t just be watching me. Anyone with eyes and half a brain is gonna see you out there and pay attention.”

“Yeah,” says Pat. “Right.”

Johnny grits his teeth, gripping the steering wheel as they stop at a light, and willing himself to take a
couple deep breaths. “You know,” he says, “it’s really hard to feel sorry for you when you won’t even help yourself. You know how to fill out an application just as well as I do. I don’t know what you think you’re waiting for, man.”

They sit in stony silence for the better part of five minutes, before Pat finally speaks up again.

“When do you think they’ll send out the scout?”

“Dunno,” Johnny says, turning into the school lot. “Soon, maybe? The next couple of months? He didn’t say.”

“Okay.” Pat’s quiet for another long minute before he asks, “So then, I might have time to get an application in?”

Johnny’s chest, which has been tight as a vice for most of the drive, eases slightly. He takes a deep, steadying breath.

“Yeah, I think so. You should totally try.”

“Okay,” Pat repeats, but he sounds a little steadier this time. He even smiles a little, and leans over once Johnny’s parked for a quick kiss. “Well, keep me posted, I guess?”

“Sure thing,” Johnny says. He leans over and kisses Pat again, deep and sweet, as he tries to will away the frustration and worry still nagging at the back of his mind.

They only break apart when there’s a sharp rap of knuckles against Pat’s window, and he looks over to see Bollig’s face nearly pressed to the glass, Shaw peering curiously around his shoulder.

“Agh,” says Pat, leaning away from Johnny to collect his bag. “What the fuck.”

“You’re traumatizing the rookie,” Bollig says loudly through the window, pointing unnecessarily at Shaw, who looks more entertained than anything else.

He opens the door in Bollig’s face as Shaw says, “Dude, I’m not traumatized, god.”

“There you go, see? We’re awesome examples for the young and impressionable,” says Pat, giving Shaw’s shoulder a little bump in solidarity.

Johnny catches up with them, bag over his shoulder and coffee in hand, and slips an arm around Pat’s waist that Pat leans into after a moment’s hesitation.

“Hey,” Bollig says, falling into stride as Shaw jogs along to keep up. “Johnny, could you give me a ride to work after practice today? My car’s in the shop, I had to hitch a ride in with my mom this morning, but she won’t be able to pick me up again in time.”

“Sure, you just work at the mall, right?” Johnny asks, and Bollig nods.

“He works at the Cookie Company,” Shaw puts in, sounding positively gleeful, even as Brandon scowls at him.

“You got a problem with that, kid?”

“Only if you don’t bring cookies to tutoring on Wednesday,” Shaw says easily.

“If that’s what it takes to get you to show up,” Bollig mutters, while Pat laughs. Shaw pretends not to hear him, breaking off a moment later when they run into Leddy and Saad at the front entrance and
wandering away without so much as a backwards glance.

“I think he’s gotten wise to you,” Johnny says quietly, smirking at Bollig, who flushes pink around the ears. “He’s gonna have you carrying his books in the halls and doing his homework for him, if you’re not careful.”

“God, shut up,” says Bollig, as Pat laughs. “It’s not super obvious, right?”

“Nah,” says Pat, grinning sidelong at Johnny. “Only if you have eyes.”

Johnny elbows him. “Don’t be a douche,” he says, but he tugs Pat in with his free hand and kisses him soundly before they head off in opposite directions.

The day passes quickly, with a pop quiz in math, a lab for Bio, and an in-class essay project that has Johnny’s temples throbbing by the time the last bell of the day finally rings. It’s enough to drive all thoughts of his conversation in the car with Pat from his mind, at least, until they’re heading out onto the ice for practice together.

“Fuck,” he mutters, wincing apologetically across the ice at Carbomb after his third bad pass in a row as they warm up. “Sorry, dude.”

Carbomb waves him off and goes off to stretch, as Johnny skates over to find his water bottle.

“Hey kid.” Johnny turns to find Seabrook looming over his shoulder, eyeing him with concern. “Everything cool?”

“Fuck off, calling me ‘kid’,” Johnny tells him, aiming a squirt from his water bottle at Seabrook, who ducks out of the way. “You graduated last spring.”

“Yup. And now I’m your assistant coach, so you better show some respect, kid.”

He jostles Johnny with an elbow, leaning over the boards to find his own water.

“Right,” says Johnny.

“Oh, come on,” Seabrook says. “What’s gotten into you, dude? You look like someone ran over your puppy and laughed about it to your face.”

“I do not,” Johnny says, and scowls even harder. “I’m fine. Hey, could we do mountain climbers today, maybe?”

Seabrook gives him a calculating stare. “Nobody has ever asked for mountain climbers and been fine. Not even you.”

Johnny narrows his eyes. “I just have a lot of energy today, shut up.”

Still eyeing him suspiciously, Seabrook says, “Don’t tell your coach to shut up. Go finish getting warmed up, I’ll be over in a minute.”

He goes, dropping down with the other guys as Keith leads them in stretches. Across the circle, Pat is avoiding his eyes.

Seabrook makes them do mountain climbers until almost the whole team is doubled over and gasping for air, and a couple of the underclassmen are actually sagged against the boards. Then he makes them run rushes, before breaking off into special teams and drills.
“If anyone makes a *Miracle* reference right now, I’ll fucking punch them,” Johnny hears Carbomb mutter, as he skates down the ice.

In an ironic twist of fate, Johnny and Pat’s line with Bicks is working seamlessly by the end of practice, Pat one-timing Johnny’s pass over Crow’s glove as Coach’s whistle sounds to send them back to the dressing room.

*This,* Johnny thinks. This is how things are supposed to be. Him and Pat, working together and reading each other and kicking ass.

He’s so distracted that his skate catches a divot on the ice and he goes down hard enough that he can feel it through his knee protection.

“Hey, you cool?” Pat’s standing over him, water bottle in one hand, stick in the other, frowning.

“Yeah, just lost an edge,” Johnny says, picking himself up and heading for the dressing room.

“Probably need to get my skates sharpened soon.”

Pat grimaces. “Yeah, me too. Hey, want to go on Wednesday after practice?”

“Sounds good,” Johnny says. Pat still won’t meet his eyes, so instead, he busies himself with peeling off his gear, stuffing it piece by piece into his bag.

He’s maybe using a bit more force than necessary, because Bollig says, “Wow, dude. You show those shinpads who’s boss, huh?”

Johnny lobs a ball of wadded up stick tape at him. “Still need a ride, smartass?”

“Yup,” says Bollig. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble,” Johnny says. “Go shower, we should be ready to head out in like, ten minutes.” He glances up at Pat for confirmation, and Pat nods, still studiously maintaining eye contact with Johnny’s left shoulder.

“Sweet,” Bollig says, grabbing his shower stuff. “Oh shit, and I gotta run to my locker real fast on the way out, too. Forgot my notes for Bio.”

“Whatever you need to do, dude,” Johnny says. “We’ll be by the front entrance.”

They sit on a low bench to wait as Bollig hustles off to collect the rest of his things. On the wall across from them is a big, hand-painted banner for the Winter Carnival, complete with some paper cutouts of ice skaters holding hands.

“What’s up with that shit,” Pat says, nodding to it with a jerk of his chin.

Johnny follows his gaze, frowning slightly. “Huh?”

“That gay-ass dance thing,” Pat says. “Like, who would ever want to go to that?”

“Classy,” Johnny says. “You do realize you’ve been dating a dude for like, two years, right?”

Pat snorts. “Yeah, whatever. You know I’m not gay, dude. I’m only into you. Anyway, I didn’t mean it like that, don’t be so fucking sensitive.”

“I--” Johnny cuts himself off. He doesn’t even know where to start. He sighs. “God, I fucking hate it when you say shit like that.”
“Well,” says Pat, “I hate a lot of shit you say, too.”

Before Johnny can reply, Bollig reemerges around a corner, arms full of books.

“Hey guys, I’m ready,” he says, breaking off abruptly and frowning. He looks back and forth between them. “Uh, everything okay?”

“Fine,” says Pat, flatly. Johnny nods, and leads them silently out to his truck.

He feels cold in the stuffy truck interior, like he never could on the ice. Something in his gut is twisting painfully every time he turns his head and catches sight of Pat, chattering away aimlessly with Bollig about life as a cookie salesman. His heart hammers in his ears.

Out in front of Cookie Co., Bollig slides out and collects his stuff.

“Thanks for the ride,” Bollig says, smiling at them both. “Catch you guys tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Johnny says, waving him off. “See you later.”

Johnny drives them back to his house out of habit, without thinking. It only occurs to him that maybe he should have just driven Pat home and left him there as he’s pulling into his own driveway, both of his parents’ cars still gone. He turns off the ignition and goes inside. Pat follows.

"Pb&j or cold cuts?" he asks, opening the fridge to dig around for the pitcher of iced tea.

Pat gets out glasses. “Um,” he says. He pauses. “Do you love me?”

Johnny nearly drops the jar of peanut butter he doesn’t really want. “Pat, what? Yeah, you know I do.”

Pat’s face is inscrutable.

"Huh," he says, without inflection, and shifts awkwardly on his feet.

"Pat," Johnny says again, reaching out, his fingers catching the heavy material of Pat's jacket before Pat moves out of reach. "What the fuck?"

"I don’t believe you," Pat says quietly. “Because fuck knows you barely ever say it, and you seem pretty excited to ditch me while you go off and do all your fancy college shit.”

Johnny opens his mouth, and then shuts it again. “Is that what this is about?” he demands, heart hammering with a new surge of rage. “I might go to some prospect training camp thing and you’re freaking out about-- about what? Are you really so goddamn insecure?”

Pat’s face is harsh, blank, walled off, and Johnny can’t look at him without wanting to hit him; can’t stand to see that look pointed at himself.

"You make it pretty easy to be," Pat says. His eyes are wet and his fists are clenched at his sides. "You spend all your fucking time now talking about getting out of here, making plans, going away to school and whatever, and then you just drop, ‘Oh yeah, I love you,’ like it’s no big deal.”

“No big--” Johnny’s throat cracks in a humorless laugh. “You’re kidding, right? You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. This from the guy who uses gay as an insult. You’re throwing some fucking tantrum because I’m trying to get myself ready for the future, and that somehow means I don’t care about you. Great. Real mature, Pat.”
“Oh, sorry I can’t be like you, Mr. Perfect,” Pat snarls back. “Do you even hear yourself? You’re such a condescending prick!” The caustic snap in his voice echoes in Johnny’s ears, but Pat rushes on. “I guess at least you made the effort to say it while you were fucking me. That was pretty fucking courteous or whatever.”

“You don’t mean that. You know better--”

“Yes I fucking mean it!” Pat is yelling now. “I say it all the time, and you just. It’s like you don’t even hear it, or want to hear it, or I don’t even fucking know. You’re too busy with other stuff, and this is some one-sided bullshit. I hate it. I hate you.”

The last words hang in the air like a rung bell.

Johnny feels like he’s drowning. “One-sided bullshit,” he says, voice hollow, and it’s only when Pat silently shrugs that he realizes -- really believes -- that this is happening. “Sure, okay. Did that girl you kissed at the party tell you she loved you?”

Pat stands and stares at him for an endless, excruciating minute, and then he turns and walks out of the room.

“Pat.” Johnny calls, too late. His voice is rough and too-loud in the empty house; uncontrolled and desperate and alien. “Pat, fucking-- Stop! Look at me, asshole!”

But Pat has already disappeared down the hall, and a moment later, Johnny hears the front door open and close.

Johnny doesn’t follow.

He hesitates, minutes dragging out long and heavy as he waits for sounds of the door opening back up again, of Pat returning. Finally, he forces himself to go upstairs, where he collapses heavily on the bed.

One of the tacks pinning Johnny’s Sakic poster to the wall is hanging out at a weird angle, and he stares at it for a long minute before getting up to push it back in. Instead, he somehow manages to just knock it all the way out of the drywall so it drops to the floor and rolls away under his bed.

He stumbles back a step and knocks over the practice stick he’d balanced against the wall. It goes down with a clatter and he’s not thinking when he sends the bedside lamp to the floor after it, and then the whole nightstand. The clock radio makes a satisfying crack as it hits the wall.

It doesn’t stop until he steps on glass -- part of a cup, maybe, or a piece of the MVP trophy from peewee league -- and the sharp stinging pain in the arch of his foot shocks him back to himself.

People aren’t made to contain this kind of emotion. They can’t be. If they were, he doesn’t think he’d be able to feel it trying to tear its way out of him, wrenching him apart from the inside out. The ache in his foot is mundane by comparison.

He hops over to the bed and pushes the mess from an overturned laundry basket onto the floor so he can sit down to dig the shard out, wiping off the blood with a wadded up t-shirt. In his head, Pat’s voice is blaring.

_I hate you I hate you I hate you._

One-sided.
Pat had called them one-sided.

They’d never been the kind of couple who did love letters or grand gestures, and Johnny had never thought about it twice. Not when loving Pat was easy as breathing, as simple and necessary as the air in his lungs.

He’s suffocating now.

If he can figure out what he did wrong. What made Pat look at him that way; what made him cheat.

Then what?

*I hate you.*

He should call. He should get in his truck and go look for Pat, talk to him.

His legs are numb weights, collapsed off the edge of the bed in front of him. His phone is buried somewhere in the wreckage of his bedroom, and he’s got no words left in him, anyway.

Outside his window the sky darkens like a new bruise and the wind picks up. It catches the sound of car doors slamming and jumbled voices from the driveway below, whipping them past his room with the last tattered shreds of fall foliage from the big tree out front.

His parents will want help with dinner. There’s garbage to be taken out, homework to be done, and dishes that will need to be washed, that he’ll take care of because there’s nothing else to be done about the real mess.

From downstairs his dad calls, and it’s easier just to go down than it is to find the breath to shout back, so he goes.
“Fuck it,” says Martin, tugging off one skate and starting to pick halfheartedly at the laces of the other. “I wanna go out.”

Nealer groans from where he’s slumped down the dressing room bench from Geno. “But I’m tired.”

“Don’t come, then,” Martin snaps, and then looks instantly sorry at the hurt look Nealer shoots him. “Whatever, dude, just get some rest. We can hang tomorrow.”

“Where are you even gonna go?” Sid asks, tromping in from the showers where he’d beelined after the game. He’d already been in there with the water running before Geno and half the guys were back in the room. “The Madison victory celebration? Gross.”

“Fuck that,” Martin says. He fiddles idly with a skate guard, glaring down at it like it can get them those last four goals back. “Like I’d want to hang out with those frat bro dickheads in training, anyway. Nah, Flower said something about a guy he knows hosting up in MTL tonight.”

“Flower said what?” says Flower, following Sid back in from the showers with a towel around his waist and hair still a dripping mess. He looks decidedly crumpled, smaller and paler than usual, with the flush of frustration still riding high across his cheeks.

“You told me about that thing your buddy’s hosting up in MTL tonight, and I wanna go,” Martin says, and Flower shrugs, plopping down on the bench next to Geno. “Sure, I’ll text him. You and who else?” He looks inquiringly around the room at the postgame expressions ranging from dejected to irate.

“Me, I guess,” Nealer says, sounding resigned, but he smiles a little when Martin rolls his eyes at him.

“Me, too,” Geno hears himself say, instantly second-guessing the decision. For good measure, he adds, “And Sid.”

“What? No,” Sid whines, glaring vehemently at Geno around the shirt he’s halfway through tugging over his head. “Fuck off, I want to sleep.”

“You don’t sleep,” Geno says, digging around in his bag to collect his own shower stuff. “I know you just stay up and be mad alone in room. No good. You come out with us.”

Sid surprises him by not putting up a struggle. He just shoots Geno a steely glare, stuffing gear back into his bag with a force that suggests each piece has personally offended him. “Fine,” he says. “But you get to drive me back to the dorms after.”

“Fine,” agrees Geno.

“Anyone else?” asks Flower, still eyeing them both dubiously as he thumbs out a text message, and when nobody else responds, “Okay, then.”

It isn’t until he’s showered and dressed and in the car with Sid and their collective gear that Geno really begins to doubt himself. He’s tired, they’re both tired, and it was a shitty loss to a team that has a habit of getting under his guys’ skin. Case and point, watching what felt like half their roster waltz right into the blue paint and trample Fleury like Consol’s defense wasn’t even there.
He isn’t exactly in a partying mood.

“We go back to dorms, if you want,” Geno says, breaking the lingering silence in the car between them. It’s been drizzling all day, a fine, chilly mist that’s sunk beneath his skin and made it impossible to keep warm, even after a game and a hot shower. “Maybe this is bad idea.”

Sid shifts, tapping fingers on his knee. “Nah,” he says. “You were right earlier. The distraction is probably good, right?”

“Right,” Geno agrees, without much enthusiasm. “Yes, okay.”

After another short pause, Sid blurts, “You know none of that was your fault, right? The game, I mean.”

Geno glances over at him, at his hardened expression and straight-set mouth, at the fingers curled in the loose denim covering his thighs.

“I know game bigger than one player,” Geno monotones, reciting their coach’s mantra. “I know.”

“It’s just.” Sid pauses, shifting like he always does when he’s anxious, when things start getting personal. “I’ve never seen you break a stick like that,” he finishes quietly. “I’ve never seen you that pissed on the ice.”

“Have been worse,” Geno says, mind instantly racing back to a night that seems simultaneously eons ago and barely last week. “Breaking stick better than breaking people.”

“Oh right,” says Sid. “Fuck Bergeron, anyway.”

“Bergeron not so bad,” Geno says, and then in response to Sid’s look of polite disbelief, “we move on.”

“I guess,” Sid mutters, and resumes the arrhythmic finger-drumming on his leg. “If you say so.”

Geno follows Flower’s directions on his phone out into the rural sprawl just north of the township itself. It’s a dark night, and the streetlights are fewer and fewer until they peter out altogether when Geno makes a sharp left onto a gravel track.

“Um,” says Sid, peering out into the dark nothingness. “Are you sure Fleury isn’t trying to get us killed?”

Geno is still trying to come up with a reassuring response, more for his own peace of mind than Sid’s, when they round a bend and are met with a blaze of light. Or rather, once Geno’s eyes adjust, a well-lit house at the bottom of a hill, with the patch of trees they’ve been driving through thinning out at the edge of a wide, sloping yard.

“Is everyone at MTL loaded?” Sid asks, eyes scanning over the graceful two-story with what looks like a four-car garage.

Geno shrugs, pulling into a tight space at the edge of the lawn between a Range Rover and a Buick sedan. “Maybe. My car feeling insecure.” He pats the worn steering wheel of the old Camry fondly. “Hoping bigger cars don’t steal its lunch money and make fun.”

“Ha ha,” says Sid, getting out and stretching. “C’mon, let’s go find the guys. I hope these assholes at least got good beer.”
Geno always feels weird crashing other teams’ parties, but a vaguely familiar and extremely sturdy-looking kid in an MTL letter jacket gets up to greet them when they reach the porch, leaving his slighter, curly-haired buddy perched on a cooler.

“Hey,” he says, grinning wide and bumping Geno’s fist with his own. Geno doesn’t have to look to know that Sid’s hands will be strategically wedged deep into his jacket pockets by now for just such an eventuality. “You guys here with Marc-Andre?”

“Yeah,” says Geno. “He come already?”

“Yup, he’s inside somewhere,” says the big guy. “I’m Rene, and this is Brandon.” He jerks his head to indicate the kid behind him. “You want a beer? Prusty, stop being a shitty host and get off that cooler.”

“But you’re just so much better at it than me,” Prusty, says, batting eyelashes at Rene even as he gets up and starts digging through the cooler. “What do you guys want? We have a whole bunch of stuff.”

Geno takes a Miller, that Sid rolls his eyes at as he accepts a diet Coke.

“I thought you wanted to cut loose?” Geno says, casting the soda in Sid’s hand a significant glance as they make their way inside. He digs Sid in the ribs with his elbow and gets swatted.

“I can cut loose however the fuck I want, Malkin,” Sid informs him.

There’s nothing light or buoyant about tonight, but Geno is still glad to be here. Glad for the bright lights and loud music, and even for the long ride through the dark. He likes the distance it puts between him and the game.

Sid says, “Oh, I think I see Paulie!” and takes off through the crowd. Geno doesn’t rush to follow, letting the milling bodies shunt him along until he feels adrift in the sea of them.

There are lots of people here, with varying degrees of familiarity. A crowd of guys in what look like MTL soccer jackets that he definitely doesn’t know are crowded around a video game, while a pair he recognizes from the MTL varsity hockey team wander past, one of them asking Geno for a lighter.

“Sorry,” Geno tells him, patting his pockets to illustrate. “No help.”

The guys wander off to bug the soccer team, and Geno is just set to try and find Sid when something catches his eye.

It can’t be Bergeron. Why would he be all the way out here?

Geno cranes around a group of girls and catches another glimpse of him, the familiar haircut, that slope in the shoulders Geno’s learned to recognize, and some purple skinny jeans. He’s turned with his back to Geno, but unmistakably Patrice Bergeron, and he’s talking to the tall, steely-eyed Madison captain.

Ugh. An irrational flare of what feels unsettlingly like jealousy stirs under Geno’s skin. He drinks more beer.

Patrice is talking animatedly, leaning in as he tugs on Toews’ sleeve. Toews looks resigned, but not unamused, and something softens around his eyes when his reply makes Patrice laugh.
Whatever, Geno hates him anyway. Him and his stupid team and their stupid win tonight and doesn’t he already have a boyfriend? That cocky little Kane kid. Geno wonders what he would think about his tall, intense boyfriend being all tall and intense at a rival team member in very, very tight purple pants.

It’s very possible that Geno drank his first beer too quickly.

He goes looking for food; something to dull the impact to his system a little, but finds another cooler full of beer first. It seems only logical that he take advantage of it while it’s right there in front of him.

After wandering around in circles for awhile, he locates some chips in the next room. He liberates an unopened bag and a third beer, and slips over to a staircase off the main hall in hopes that he might spot his friends in the clusters of people passing by. After a few minutes of waiting, he texts Sid.

*On the stairs. where r u guys?*

It takes a few minutes, but Sid’s response comes back. *What stairs?? Theres like five. U ok?*

*Fine. Geno texts. Have beer, tho. U good 2 drive?*

*Sure. Sid sends, and then a second later, Rly, what stairs?? We’re out back, come find us.*

Geno texts back, *K*, but doesn’t move.

Ten minutes later, his beer is gone and he finally gains the motivation to move, shuffling around clusters of people back to the cooler. His phone buzzes against his leg, probably Sid again, but as he reaches into his pocket to check the message, he catches a flash of purple from the corner of his eye.

Patrice is by himself this time, slouched against the wall opposite Geno and fiddling intently with his phone.

Before Geno really thinks about what he’s doing, he’s dropped his own phone back into his pocket and grabbed a couple of fresh beers, skirting around the room to Patrice’s corner.

“Hey,” he says, loud enough to be heard over the commotion, and for Patrice to look up and see him, eyes widening in surprise. He holds out the beer, just like last time. “What you doing here?”

It’s not exactly the smoothest opener, and Patrice seems to agree, snorting a laugh but accepting the beer, anyway. “Uh, I was invited? My cousins all go to MTL so I’ve known Prusty for ages. What are you doing here?”

“My goalie was invited. He need constant supervising, so I go, too.”

It’s meant to be a joke, but Patrice doesn’t seem to get it, screwing up his mouth like he isn’t sure whether or not to laugh, and popping the tab on his beer can instead. “Oh,” he says, and then stands awkwardly for a moment. “Well uh, thanks for the beer.”

“Is no problem,” Geno says. He can’t tell whether or not that was a dismissal, so he doesn’t move, but Patrice doesn’t offer anything else to the conversation. The silence stretches on.

“So uh,” says Patrice, clearly searching for something to say, “sorry about your game tonight.”

Geno’s heart sinks all over again; that sick, deflated feeling he always gets after losses. “Eh,” he says, trying for stoic. “Was just one game.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” agrees Patrice. “We had a by-week, it was weird not playing tonight.”
As awkward and stiff as the conversation is, Geno is having a hard time wanting to end it. He likes looking at Patrice when he talks, at the way he chews his lip during pauses, and how his accent only picks up on certain words.

He says, “You come with Toews.”

For a moment, Patrice looks taken aback by the abruptness of the statement, heavy eyebrows drawing together in a way that makes Geno reflexively nervous.

“Yeah, so. Jealous?” he asks, fingers picking at his beer can’s tab and eyes flicking up to meet Geno’s.

“No,” Geno says, probably a bit too vehemently, because Patrice’s smirk deepens. “Not jealous. Why I should be jealous? You not, I mean, we aren’t…”

He flounders, digging around for the right word, but coming up empty. Maybe he should just cut his losses and go find Sid and the guys before this night gets any stupider.

“No jealous,” he finishes, finally.

“I can see that,” says Patrice, and Geno is reminded very suddenly of why he spent so long wanting to punch this kid in the head.

Instead, he just rolls his eyes. “I see you and I remember we talk about drinking contest. Was thinking maybe we find vodka. Now, though, you being smartass. Maybe I rethink.”

“You were serious about that?” The genuine surprise in Patrice’s voice catches Geno off-guard. He shrugs.

“Yes? Should it have been joke?” He hates this. Hates the stupid, subtle social cues that somehow still are lost in translation, no matter how good his English gets.

“Oh, um, I don’t know.” There’s color rising high in Patrice’s cheeks now, and that, more than anything, eases Geno’s worry. “I guess I figured...I mean. I didn’t really think about it. But you really want to?”

“If you do,” says Geno, which seems the easiest answer. So what if he gets shut down? So what if Patrice and asshole Toews and all their buddies laugh about him later.

Patrice doesn’t seem in a laughing mood, though. His eyes shift back up to Geno’s face again and the color in his cheeks darkens.

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“Okay,” he says, finally.

“Okay,” Geno echoes, and smiles, for what feels like the first time all night. “We go find vodka?”

“What about tequila?” Patrice asks, but at the look on Geno’s face he cracks up. “Okay, okay, vodka is fine. Whatever. You’re a stereotype.”

“I don’t know what you talking about,” Geno grumbles, but lets Patrice lead their way down the hall to the kitchen, where a collection of liquor bottles is assembled on the counter.

They find a reasonably full bottle of Costco house-brand vodka, and Patrice says, “So, should we take this upstairs?”

It’s the first time Geno has ever heard him sound shy.
He says, “What’s upstairs?”

“The guest room,” says Patrice. He hands Geno the bottle. “C’mon, I’ll show you.”

The guest room, as it transpires, is occupied. They open the door and Geno only catches a flash of white bedsheet and bare skin before slamming it again.

“Um,” he says.

Patrice is giggling. Nervous laughter that Geno can feel where Patrice had fallen into him in their haste to shut the door. There’s nobody else around up here, on the dim second-floor landing, and Patrice doesn’t move further away. Geno’s hand finds his hip and settles there.

“I have another idea,” Patrice says. He looks up and smiles again, that wry little curl of lips. All Geno can think about is kissing him.

Patrice’s hand finds his, tugging him back down the hall to another door. He knocks this time, but when nobody answers, he turns the knob and shunts them both through, locking the door behind them with a click.

It’s a bathroom.

“This is bathroom,” says Geno.

“Yes,” says Patrice. “Do you have a better idea?”

Geno doesn’t, so he just unscrews the cap on the vodka and takes a swig. It’s not even cold, and it burns going down, but he refuses to flinch.

“I have a few ideas,” he says, and hands the bottle back to Patrice.

Patrice laughs and takes a swig himself. “No, no ideas until I’ve drunk your cocky Russian ass under the table.” He pauses, frowning. “Or, into the bathtub or whatever.”

“How can I have any ideas if I pass out in bathtub?” Geno asks, moving forward into Patrice’s space and reaching for the bottle. Patrice hangs on, fingers cool under Geno’s for a long moment before he relinquishes it and takes a step back, putting space between them again.

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” he says, and Geno makes a face at him.

He plops down on the lip of the tub and toasts Patrice with the bottle before taking another long swallow. “To figuring things out.”

Laughing, Patrice settles next to him. Not quite touching, but close enough that their elbows bump together when Patrice reclaims the vodka. They drink in silence for a few minutes, trading shots back and forth until Geno loses track and his vision begins to soften at the edges. He sways gently, and their shoulders brush, so he does it again.

“What’re you doing?” Patrice asks, and there’s a tipsy drag to the words, or maybe just his accent coming out more strongly as he drinks.

“Dunno,” says Geno, shrugging and enjoying how he can feel Patrice’s warmth even through their layers of clothing where their shoulders touch. The liquor doesn’t burn anymore going down, and everything is light and pleasantly floaty.

He looks down when he feels pressure, and sees Patrice’s hand curved over his thigh, moving slowly
upward. When he looks back up again, Patrice is watching him, pink-cheeked but intent, like he expects Geno to bolt.

Like Geno isn’t half-hard in his jeans already.

“What do you wanna be doing?” Patrice asks.

Geno kisses him. It’s easier than trying to come up with a witty, coherent answer.

It’s good, as kisses go. Wet, and a little sloppy, but good. Patrice’s roaming hand finds the ridge of Geno’s chubbed dick through his jeans and rests there, thumb rubbing idly over the hardening curve until he’s desperate and moaning into Patrice’s mouth.

Patrice says, “Can I--? I wanna,” tugging at the button on Geno’s fly, and Geno nods.

This should probably be weirder than it is. The thought occurs hazily, in the back of his mind, but too many other sensations overpower it and it’s quickly buried under the single-minded urge for more.

Geno opens his eyes and looks at Patrice, at his short, dark hair, and skin still olive-tan from summer. He’s thin, but Geno can feel the smoothly muscled planes and angles of him where they’re pressed together, in a way that, more than any other details, separates him from any of the girls Geno’s done this with.

Or, not this exactly. Geno has never thought of himself as the guy who hooks up a lot, the guy who comes back to class on Monday with a bunch of crazy stories. He likes dates, and holding hands, and the way the last girl he’d dated, Alyssa, had sneaked him up to her dorm room when her roommate was out in the late afternoons after hockey practice. There had been something safe about that; predictable. None of this frenzied confusion under cover of darkness and loud music, none of the worry over what anyone might say if they do somehow hear about this on Monday.

He opens his eyes, and Patrice must feel the pause, because he opens his, too, and sits back, his hand stilling.

“You cool?” he asks, and Geno nods.

He says, “Feels good,” because it does. Patrice’s hand on his dick is just calloused enough for some added friction that has Geno concentrating extra hard just to stay balanced on the lip of the tub.

“Good,” says Patrice. “Want me to blow you?”

It shouldn’t be a difficult question, but Geno’s “Yeah,” dies before it leaves his throat. He swallows dryly a couple times.

“Oh god,” says Patrice, sounding suddenly wary, bordering on annoyed. “What?”

“No,” Geno says quickly, glad his voice seems to be working again. “No, no, is fine, I just.” He flounders again. Patrice’s hand is still on his dick, still stroking it distractedly without any kind of rhythm, but it’s enough to keep his thoughts from focusing. “Like kissing you. Hand feels good. Maybe we just--”

He doesn’t bother finishing, just moves them both haphazardly to the floor, landing in a heap straddling Patrice’s waist. Patrice giggles, looking up at him; drunken, easy laughter that seems to bubble out of him, still trying to get hands into Geno’s pants.
“What so funny?” Geno asks.

Patrice grins. He looks up at Geno with his heavy, dark eyes, his too-big nose, and unfortunate haircut, and all Geno can think is how weird it is to think of another guy as beautiful.

“Nothing,” says Patrice, still grinning like he knows full well that Geno’s staring, which he must. It’s kind of obvious. “This just feels kinda familiar for us.”

His hands find Geno’s hips and settle there. Geno snorts a laugh.

“This more fun,” he says. “Better when less punching.”

“Agreed,” says Patrice, and then shifts, rolling his hips up. “Hey, so what do you want? You sure you don’t want me to blow you?”

Geno leans down, enjoying the way Patrice’s body responds, pinned under his, especially when Geno sucks a bruise against his neck. He can actually feel the moan leave Patrice’s throat.

“I’m sure,” Geno says, even though his dick is hard and heavy in his open pants, and he hates himself a little for it. “You drunk.”

“Duh,” says Patrice, and that trace of irritation is back in his voice. “So are you, that’s kind of the point.”

*You’re drunker*, Geno doesn’t say, and instead just covers Patrice’s mouth with his own, grinding their hips together until Patrice stops huffing petulantly against his lips.

“I like touching you,” Patrice mumbles, words getting halfway lost between sloppy kisses. His hands are roaming again, fumbling, trying to tug Geno’s pants down past his ass, even if his straddled position makes that nearly impossible. “Can I still--?”

“Yeah,” says Geno, because somehow a hand job is less weird than this drunk kid sucking his dick. “Like you touching me.”

“Cool,” says Patrice.

They’re both quiet for awhile, breathing each other’s air in short, staccato bursts. Geno can hear his own thundering pulse in his ears, the rasp of denim on denim, and skin on skin. Patrice’s mouth finds his throat, wet and warm and sharp when he bites just above the juncture of Geno’s neck and shoulder, and just like that, he’s coming.

Patrice makes a surprised noise, but keeps jerking him through it, brushing off Geno’s mumbles of, “Sorry, sorry, I mean to warn you,” in favor of mouthing over his neck some more.

“Man, don’t worry about it,” and unceremoniously wipes his hand off on the back of Geno’s pants. “But could you, like, return the favor?”

Patrice’s dick is smooth and warm and hard in his hand, but he doesn’t let himself think much more beyond that. It’s kind of like jerking himself off in reverse, so he just does the same stuff he likes himself, taking his time with the teasing and touching until Patrice is breathless and squirming under him before easing into long, tight strokes.

Patrice says, “Fuck, yeah, just like that,” and then, “wait, no, faster. Go faster. Yeah.”

It’s easy to laugh, and Patrice laughs, too, fucking his hips up in time with Geno’s hand until they
stutter and he moans and then he’s coming hot and wet over Geno’s fingers.

“Payback,” he mumbles, and grins when Geno makes a face at him.

They stay like that a moment, rumpled and grinning blearily at each other from a few inches away, but then Patrice’s expression changes. He frowns.

“Get off, get off,” he says, swatting Geno’s hands away. Geno doesn’t even have time to be affronted before Patrice shoves him aside and dives for the toilet, barely making it in time to get the lid up and puke.

Geno waits for him to straighten up, shoulders heaving and face sweaty and pale, before he scoots closer.

“You okay?” he asks, tentatively, but Patrice just shudders again and leans back over with an awful retching noise.

There’s a cup next to the sink, presumably for guests and their toothbrushes, and Geno fills it with water before sitting back down again. When Patrice finally straightens again, Geno holds it out and Patrice takes it with a miserable groan of thanks.

“I think you won the drinking game,” he mumbles between tentative sips, and Geno pats his back gently.

“I forget we playing. Like other stuff better,” he admits.

Patrice affords him a wan approximation of his wry grin. “Sorry I killed the mood.”

Geno just shrugs, holding out an arm, and after a moment’s hesitation, Patrice scoots over and curls up against him, their backs against the cool porcelain edge of the tub.

“I have fun,” Geno says. “You have fun?”

“Everything was great up ‘til the puking,” Patrice mumbles, patting Geno’s thigh heavily and slumping a little more into his side. “Just gonna sit here a minute, I’ll be fine.”

“No falling asleep,” Geno warns, but Patrice just makes an incoherent noise against his shoulder and oozes down further onto the bathmat.

Add this to the list of reasons Geno has never been a hooking-up kind of guy.

“Patrice,” he says, and then louder, giving Patrice’s shoulder a little jostle, “Bergeron.”

Patrice’s head just lolls on his shoulder, where Geno’s arm is starting to go all numb and tingly with the dead weight of him. Geno’s phone vibrates, and he has to dig around awkwardly in his jeans pocket for it.

WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU???? Sid has sent, and Geno’s stomach goes cold when he reads the time. It’s been nearly two hours since he said he’d come find them.

Sorry sorry, he texts back, fumbling drunkenly over the tiny letters. I lose track of time. You still out back?

Yes. Comes Sid’s reply, only a couple seconds later, and Geno can picture the frustrated glare behind the words even if he can’t see it. Come the fuck out here. Nealer just nearly hit a guy, shit is stupid, I’m ready to leave.
Geno bites his lip, considering. He looks down at the top of Patrice’s sleeping head, and then at the door, and then down at his phone again. He sighs.

Meet me at car, then, he writes. I just be a minute.

Fine. Sid says.

Geno shifts, straightening up a little and giving Patrice another deliberate but gentle shake. “Bergeron,” he says. “You wake up now. I have to go.”

He doesn’t expect much, and sure enough, Patrice sleeps on. He just slumps over sideways on the bathmat when Geno carefully shifts them both and gets to his feet. As an afterthought, he tugs a folded towel off the wall rack and lays it over Patrice like a blanket. Then he beelines for the door.

Downstairs, things are still in full swing. The soft, quiet stillness of the upstairs bathroom dulled Geno’s buzz, and he has to clutch the railing for a moment to steady himself before stepping off the carpeted landing and into the fray.

He elbows his way through the throngs of people, grateful for his height that allows him to see over the heads of dozens of high schoolers until he finally catches sight of a dark head and sharp, narrowed eyes near the back wall of the TV room. Geno never thought he would actually be glad to see Jonathan Toews.

“Hi,” he says, and then without waiting for a response, “Bergeron is asleep in bathroom upstairs.”

“Uh,” says Toews, taking a step back and giving Geno a cautious once-over as if assessing foul play. “What?”

“You his friend, right?” Geno asks, persistently.

“Yeah,” Toews says, toneless.

“Then you go get friend from bathroom upstairs before something bad happen.”

Toews’s disbelieving stare is one of someone clearly accustomed to giving orders, rather than receiving them. After a moment he says, “Okay,” but he’s still watching Geno with that flat, calculating expression.


“Uh-huh,” says Toews, slowly. And Geno thinks uncomfortably that he can almost hear the wheels turning in Toews’s head. “Well, thanks, then.”

“Yeah,” says Geno, already backing for the hallway. “Is no problem. You have good night.”

“You too,” Toews says after him. And then, just before the noise of the crowd swallows the words, “Good game, Malkin.”

Geno grits his teeth and wills himself to keep moving in the direction of the front door. Explaining away another black eye is not something he needs to deal with right now, and asshole Toews and his douchey smirk don’t deserve the satisfaction.

At least, that’s what he tells himself until he’s a safe distance away, picking carefully through the rutted grass of the front drive in the general direction of the car.

“What the fuck,” comes Sid’s voice out of the dark, somewhere to his left, and Geno aims for that.
He’ll take angry Sid Crosby over creepy MadTech kids any day. “Did you get lost again? How drunk are you?”

“Drunk,” Geno says, grateful for the ready-made excuse. “You drive?”

He tosses the keys to Sid, who catches them, but doesn’t adjust his glare. “You’re fucking lucky I didn’t drink tonight,” he mutters, getting in and leaning over to pop the passenger side lock for Geno. “Asshat.”

“I am a hat for asses,” Geno confirms, doing his best to look as penitent as possible when Sid casts him an unamused look. “Very sorry, Sid. I drink a lot and lose track of time.”

“No shit,” Sid says, but he sounds less harsh this time, settling in behind the wheel and navigating them back toward the main road. He sighs. “Tonight was just fucking stupid.”

Geno nods agreeably, doing his best not to think about Patrice’s warm mouth on his, and his hand in Geno’s pants. The way his eyes had gone all soft and unfocused right before he’d come.

Sid puts on the radio and Geno lets himself doze. Patrice had felt nice all curled up against his side, and Geno’s hazy mind wanders to thinking of how maybe it would be even nicer to do that again, but without the sick, miserable, unconscious part. In a dark movie theater. Or even the back seat of this car.

Beside him, Sid hums tunelessly along with pop music, and Geno drifts, smiling in spite of bad losses and rival captains, angry friends and impending hangovers.
December: Patrice

Practice gets canceled on Thursday, abruptly derailing all of Patrice’s carefully laid plans to continue distracting himself from the memories of last Friday night. Something about the refrigeration coils going on the fritz, in what feels like a deliberate attempt by the universe to ruin Patrice’s life. As if to prove this point, he doesn’t have a single name on his tutoring list when he checks in at the library.

“That’s because you’re always desperate and cramming for finals in a month,” he tells Thornton, morosely.

Thorty just laughs at him. “Chill out Cap,” he says, rummaging through his pack for car keys as Tuukks taps his foot and makes impatient noises at them both. “I wanna enjoy the free time while we’ve got it! When’s the last time you had an afternoon off, anyway? Go relax. Take a load off.”

They peel out of the student lot in a flurry of bickering over pizza or burgers, leaving Patrice to shuffle off resignedly to his own car as he catalogs all the ways he’s going to tell Thorty I told you so when he’s stuck repeating Algebra II next year.

Because really, the last thing Patrice wants right now is an afternoon off, to spend some quality time alone with his thoughts. Thoughts that, lately, tend to ruminate around Evgeni Malkin’s mouth, and the way his big hands gripped Patrice’s hips, and how Patrice is pretty sure he’s never come so hard in his life.

But then there’s also the part where Johnny Toews had to peel him off a bathroom floor and half-carry him out to the car. Patrice is just glad he’d passed back out again before Johnny’d had a chance to ask questions.

The point is, Patrice is not currently in the market for alone time.

In the end, he texts Bollig.

He only really means to check and see if Brandon will be at Avec tonight, because there’s something strangely comforting about the idea of dim lights and loud music and the kind of default anonymity they provide, but at the last minute he changes his mind and asks, You wanna grab food after practice?

He’s expecting a wait, but only a few minutes later he gets back, Sure! Done at 4:30. Where at?

Diner at Lake/Morgan he sends, and starts the car.

Unlike Shawn Thornton, Patrice actually wants to pass his finals. He’s got a couple hours to kill, so he just brings his bookbag into the diner and finds a quiet booth near the back where he can spread out, and when Brandon eventually shows up, Patrice is midway through his notes on Othello, and finishing off a third refill of iced tea.

“Hey,” Brandon says, sliding into the booth and shrugging his heavy jacket off. “Big test?”

Patrice hands him a menu and starts shuffling papers, sliding everything back into his bag. “Nah, just getting a jump on finals, I guess. Practice was canceled so I had some time.”

Brandon snorts. “You had some time, so you decided to study for finals. In early December. Man, have you ever relaxed a day in your life?”
“I relax plenty,” Patrice says with dignity. “I just like to keep busy.”

“Oh, sure,” Brandon says. “Is that what we’re calling it? We can hit up the club later, if you want. I bet Carey Price wouldn’t mind keeping you bus-- OW!”

Patrice smirks as Brandon glares and rubs his shin.

Their server arrives before things can escalate, and once they’ve placed their orders, they sit in silence for several long moments. Patrice fidgets with his straw wrapper while Brandon prods his water glass across the tabletop in front of him, making patterns with the rings of condensation.

“So,” Brandon says at last. “What’s going on?”

Patrice studiously avoids his eyes in favor of tying a careful knot in the flimsy paper. “I told you, my practice was canceled.”

“Duh,” Brandon says. “But I haven’t seen you at the club in weeks, and we pretty much never talk otherwise. What’s the occasion?”

“I need an excuse to want to hang out with you?” Patrice tries, but Brandon fixes him with a deadpan stare. “Okay, fine. I needed a distraction from a bunch of dumb drama.”

“Boy drama?” Brandon asks, waggling his eyebrows, and Patrice strongly considers kicking him again.

Instead he says, “God, don’t be gross. Next you’re gonna want to paint our nails and braid each other’s hair or something.”

Brandon rolls his eyes, but something in his expression changes, sobering a little. “Dude, come on,” he says quietly. “You really think I’d judge?”

Patrice tries to maintain his stoic glare, but something around Brandon’s eyes has gone all uncharacteristically soft and disarming and he finds himself saying, “No, I guess not.”

“Right. Or you wouldn’t have called me,” Brandon confirms.

“How the hell are you so damn confident all the time?” Patrice snorts, laughing in spite of himself and watching Brandon’s heavy eyebrows quirk in amusement.

“Why shouldn’t I be?” he shoots back. “Just because I’m not some fancy top six player doesn’t mean--” He breaks off laughing as Patrice starts to sputter in protest. “Man, you should see your face right now.”

“Shut up,” Patrice grumbles, looking back down into his water glass to avoid Brandon’s eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

“No,” Brandon agrees solemnly. “No, you’re much too polite for that.”

“If you wanna sit around being a smartass, maybe I’ll just leave,” Patrice mutters cagily. He flicks a piece of straw wrapper at Brandon, but it just flutters harmlessly off the edge of the table.

“Aw, c’mon,” Brandon says. “I’m sorry, I’ll be nicer. I am super sensitive and all in touch with my feelings and shit. You can talk to me.”

Patrice stares at him. “You really want to hear about my crap?”
Brandon shrugs. “If it’s boring, you can pay for my burger to compensate.”

“Gee, thanks,” says Patrice, rolling his eyes. “Fine, I dunno. There’s a guy. I like him, probably. It’s dumb. The end.”

Brandon takes a sip of water, but doesn’t say anything, and the silence stretches into awkwardness.

“I told you it’s dumb,” Patrice says again, defensively. He wishes their food would come already so at least he’d have something to do with his hands.

“Why is it dumb that you like a boy?” Brandon asks finally.

“Probable like,” Patrice reminds him. Then he adds, “Because I don’t want it to be a thing. Like with Johnny and Pat, how basically everyone knew their business and shit as soon as they came out.

“I hate that, it’s gross, and I don’t feel like being some mascot cause for the boosters and admin staff to use, you know? They were the headline of every league newsletter for like, a year.”

“I guess,” Brandon says, slowly. “But why would you liking a boy mean any of that? Oh god, it’s not actually Toews, is it?”

Patrice chokes on a sip of water, coughing into a napkin as he shakes his head. “God, no. I mean, he’s my friend! He’s cool, but just. No.”


Patrice opens his mouth, and then closes it again, rolling Geno’s name around on the tip of his tongue. It would be so easy, but somehow it sticks in his throat and he ends up just swallowing dryly and glancing away.

“He’s not on my team,” he mutters, finally. Not that it’s relevant to Brandon’s question, but somehow it seems important to Patrice that he mention it. “He’s not...It would make things complicated.”

“So?” says Brandon. “What’d be wrong with that? Sometimes a little complicated can be fun.”

“Are you even listening to me?” Patrice bursts out, and then immediately clamps his mouth shut as the waitress arrives back with their food. He hasn’t eaten since lunch, but suddenly the spinach salad doesn’t look terribly appealing.

Meanwhile, Brandon, is smothering his fries in ketchup without a care in the world.

“I’m listening,” Brandon says around a mouthful, once their waitress has disappeared again. “It just sounds like you’re making excuses, man. What about this mystery guy, is he into you?”

Something twists queasily in the pit of Patrice’s stomach and he pokes disinterestedly at his salad. Memories of the MTL party keep drifting back to him in snippets and snatches, making his skin feel hot and itchy with embarrassment.

“Dunno,” he settles on mumbling, finally. “We don’t talk a whole lot.”

Brandon’s eyebrows shoot towards his hairline. “Yeah? But do you..?” He trails off, leaving the implication dangling there and deepening the flush in Patrice’s cheeks.

“Yeah,” he says, almost whispering, and then glares when Brandon looks positively gleeful. “Just at parties, a couple times.”
“So?” Brandon demands, wielding a fry like a conductor’s baton. “What’s the issue? Go for it!”

Patrice snatches the fry out of his hand, stuffing it into his own mouth and huffing. “I already told you, I’m not into complicated shit.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Brandon settles back in his seat, sighing and fixing Patrice with an appraising look. “So then what, dude? Why’d you ask me here, if you don’t want me to advise or enable you? Do you want me to talk you out of it? Because I like you and I’m flattered as hell you told me all this, but I don’t think I’d feel comfortable helping you get even more tightly wound.”

Patrice makes a face at him as he finally spears a forkful of salad.

“I don’t know what I want,” he says. And he’d only meant to answer Brandon’s last question, but the words overwhelm him coming out of his own mouth, daunting and honest. He takes another bite to keep from saying more.

“Duh,” says Brandon agreeably, seemingly oblivious to Patrice’s minor existential crisis and more interested in trying to fit as much cheeseburger into his mouth as possible.

Brandon makes uncomplicated look easy.

“How’s your stuff?” Patrice asks, after a minute or two of quiet chewing. “Sorry, we’ve just been talking about my crap this whole time.”

Brandon shrugs. “What stuff? The cookie gig is cool, school’s fine, the team’s doing good. I got no complaints.” He pops a fry into his mouth and grins obnoxiously. “That big guy on Edmonton tried to start shit, so I socked him in the face. That was pretty fun.”

“You have weird ideas of fun,” says Patrice, and Brandon just grins bigger. “What about that kid you were mooning over. How’s that?”

“Who?” Brandon says, way too quickly. His cheeks go pink and he fumbles the ketchup.


“Shut up,” says Brandon, stoically. “I am not a hypocrite, that is a totally different set of circumstances.”

“How do you know?” Patrice demands. “I barely told you any details!”

“Right,” agrees Brandon. “So then, are you going to?”

“...No,” says Patrice. He takes an enormous bite of salad and uses the excuse of concentrating on not choking to avoid Brandon’s eyes.

Brandon says, “Well, then.”

Patrice aims another kick at him under the table.

--

December traditionally heralds the last big outdoor party of the year: A bonfire on the west edge of the lake, almost up in Edmonton. There’s a big, long strip of beach that’s usually devoid of tourists and authorities by this late in the year, fit to contain the rowdy sprawl of well over half the league.

Of course it starts snowing on Friday morning.
The ground isn’t really cold enough for it to stick, especially up at the beach, but Patrice still thinks quiet thoughts to himself about warm beds and dry clothes as he showers off after their game against MTL.

Beating by, more like.

They’ve got more skill up front, and Tuukks is at least as on top of things as Price lately, but for whatever reason, this season seems no different than any other, watching Causeway systematically fall to pieces the second they hit the ice against MTL. He can almost hear the hockey gods laughing at him.

It doesn’t help that Carey had started leering at him from behind the mask every time he’d gotten within range. He could just be paranoid, but somehow, Patrice doubts it. He has got to stop messing around with members of opposing teams.

The drive is over an hour and a half, from MTL to the beach, more with the continued fitful flurries that swirl around them, creating pale cyclones that reflect bright in the headlights on the road ahead. For once, Patrice is grateful for the car full of people he finds himself transporting, with Segs in the front next to him spending most of the ride turned around in his seat and shouting at Marchy, Krug, and Bart in the back about the right way to draft a fantasy team. Nobody even seems to notice that he doesn’t say a word the whole trip.

Things are already in full swing when they arrive, and Patrice slows down, cruising for nearly three blocks before he finds a parking spot along the row of vehicles lined up on the beachfront side. Marchy is already texting Thorty and Looch, trying to figure out where the rest of the Causeway guys are, and he trails after them, calling out directions as they make their way over the low swell of dunes and weather-worn beach grass whipping at their ankles, towards the distant roar and glow of an enormous bonfire.

This easily dwarfs the one from weeks before, sending sparks and smoke high enough that they get lost among the misty, low-scudding clouds. Here and there, more snowflakes caught on the wind are blown stinging-cold against Patrice’s exposed face, and even in multiple layers, he still tugs the outer shell of his coat tighter around himself. Behind it all, nearly swallowed up by the thick blanketing darkness, he can just barely make out the curling froth that marks the edge of the shore. Just looking at it makes him colder.

“You coming, man?” Segs practically shouts, over a gust of wind that whips Patrice’s hood back from his face.

He calls, “Yeah, sorry,” and hurries to catch up, slogging through the loose sand on the backside of the dune and falling into step. “How far are they?”

“Thorty says the guys who’ve gotten here already are on the southeast side, near the fire,” Marchy says, holding out his phone with the text message glowing eerily up at them.

Patrice sighs in relief. “Oh good, at least we’ll be warm.”

“Sure,” agrees Segs, with a wolfish grin, linking his arm with Patrice’s and hauling him along at a faster pace. “We might not have eyebrows by the end, but at least we won’t lose any toes to frostbite.”

“Bergy’s got more than enough eyebrow to spare,” Marchy says, batting his eyelashes at Patrice as Krug and Barty laugh at them.
“Look in a mirror sometime,” Patrice tells him serenely.

They find Tuukks and Thorty and Khu right where they said they’d be, in the blessed shadow of warmth cast by the fire, and Looch and Davy emerge a few minutes later from the throngs of faceless silhouettes to join them. They sprawl out on Khu’s collection of beach blankets, using coats and scarves and each other’s bellies for pillows, and soon Patrice is warm enough to unzip his outer layer.

“You okay, dude?” Segs is frowning sidelong at him, one eye open. “You’ve been kinda weird and quiet all night.”

“Yeah,” Patrice says, forcing a smile. “It sucked losing tonight, but I’ll be fine.”

Segs nods, shutting his eyes again with a smirk. “Nice feelings talk, Cap,” he says. “You’re growing as a person.”

“Ugh,” groans Patrice, shoving until he’s got more of their makeshift pillow and Segs yelps, trying to jostle back. “Forget I said anything.”

“Dude, no.” When Patrice looks back over, Segs is looking at him, dark eyes reflecting amber in the bonfire glow, long eyelashes throwing shadows down the abrupt angle of his cheekbones. “I get it. You got the captaincy gig, you’re up to your eyeballs in AP class shit, and tutoring, and whatever else. You actually have, like, constructive family time with your parents. I don’t know when you even find time to sleep.”

Patrice laughs, shutting his eyes so he can feel the warm glow against his closed lids, heat making the skin of his face pleasantly tight and prickly. “Honestly, I’m pretty sure I could nap right here,” he admits.

“Lame,” says Segs, drawing out the word, and just like that the moment is over. He sits up, pushing his hair back. “I’m gonna go find beer. You want anything?”

“See if there’s any Coke,” Patrice says, and forces himself to sit up, willing away the sleepy haze that keeps trying to settle over him.

Segs salutes. “Aye aye, Captain,” he says, and tugs Marchy away from where he’s clustered with the other guys, both of them quickly swallowed up by the dark.

“I’m going to take a walk, too,” Patrice tells Davy, who has appropriated Looch’s back as a pillow and is playing a game on his phone, while Looch and Khu argue about something. Davy nods without looking up.

He only means to walk down to the water, but his winding path avoiding the scattered clusters of raucous kids leads him further back down the shore in the direction they’d come. It’s nice, though; quieter out here away from the bonfire that’s drawn everyone closer in as the night gets colder. Patrice zips his coat back up and quickens his pace to stay warm, a sharp breeze blowing in off the water and sending flurries of snow and sand scudding around him.

The lake is beautiful in a harsh, eerie way that makes the short hairs on the back of Patrice’s neck prickle and his heart race a little as he gets close. The night is inky and moonless, or maybe the low cloud cover is just too thick, and even straining his eyes, it’s impossible to make out where lake ends and sky begins. Somewhere off in the vast, velvety expanse of nothingness that may as well stretch out indefinitely in front of him.

His eyes start to play tricks on him, the longer he faces away from the glow of fire and headlights
back along the beach. The wind whips past, scattering the party sounds so they only reach him in tattered snippets between gusts. He can only just make out the whitecaps near shore, ghostly and so quick to dissolve that half the time he thinks he imagines them.

Something moves, closer by in his periphery, and at first he ignores it, writing it off as another trick of the light, or the dark, until it moves again, closer by.

“Hi,” says a voice. Low, familiar, and making something in Patrice’s gut clench. “You okay?”

Patrice says, “Yeah,” before even looking up. Geno Malkin is standing only a few paces off, in nothing but a t-shirt and jeans. His hair is blown haphazardly around his face, nearly as pale as the lake froth under the dark tangle. Patrice has never really taken the time in all their encounters to take in the awkward, gangling grace of him.

“You out here all alone,” Geno says simply. Not a question.

Patrice shrugs, working the toe of one sneaker into the damp sand. “My guys are back that way,” he juts his chin in the direction he’d come. “I was bored.”

“I see you, I know,” Geno says, and then quickly amends, “I mean, me and Nealer walk in behind you when we get here. Not creepy.” He grins, wide and sheepish and full of very white teeth.

Patrice smiles back. He’s having a hard time making eye contact, memories of their last encounter making his cheeks burn hot with embarrassment.

He flicks his eyes sideways at the pale curve of Geno’s shoulder, where it forms an arabesque with the long line of his spine. The two of them can’t be more than a few months apart in age, but Patrice feels like a kid by comparison; skinny and under-developed.

Hunching in upon himself a little more, he toes deeper into the sand. “Aren’t you cold, though?”

Geno shrugs. “Russian blood is hot. Have to keep warm for long Siberian winter. This nothing.” He waves a hand dismissively with another of those wide, toothy grins.

“Oh, okay,” says Patrice. He can tell Geno is trying to get him going, get him talking, make him laugh, but all he can think about is being a gross, drunk mess all over Brandon Prust’s guest bathroom and how that must’ve looked. “It’s a nice night,” he tries at last, when Geno seems intent on hanging around.

“Nice,” Geno agrees. He takes a step forward so they’re standing shoulder to shoulder, looking out over the huge, dark, amalgamous expanse of lake and sky. “Feel like…” He pauses, whether simply thinking or searching for the proper English, Patrice can’t tell. “Feel like the sky swallow us up if we get too close.”

Geno reaches out a hand, as if to touch...what, Patrice isn’t sure. He isn’t grinning or joking anymore, but there’s something soft lingering around his eyes, and Patrice can’t seem to force himself to look away.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he says quietly. “While I was standing here before. It’s like, if I didn’t know there was a spit of land out there,” he points out to the left, “or that there are stars and stuff that we just can’t see through the clouds, it would feel like we were standing on the edge of the world. We’d just fall in and disappear if we got near enough.”

Between them, Geno’s hand finds his and their fingers twine together. Patrice doesn’t stop him.
“Go out with me,” Geno says softly, and for the first time, there’s a note of nervousness in his voice. “I take you out, we go on real date.”

Words tumble through Patrice’s brain, forming a scrum in his throat and sticking. Geno’s hand is warm around his.

“I don’t really date,” he finally says, and wonders if Geno can hear the hammering of his heart through all the layers he’s got on.

Geno’s fingers give his a little squeeze. “Me neither, but maybe have to start somewhere, right?”

Patrice smiles weakly, still looking out over the water.

“Can I kiss you?” Geno asks, and Patrice nods.

“Yeah, um. Yeah,” he says.

It’s easy as breathing, and Patrice’s mind begins to wander. What it would feel like with Geno between his legs, or maybe behind him, one of those strong arms slung around his waist?

He pulls back abruptly. “I. I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing,” he stammers, trying to avoid the look of open hurt and confusion in Geno’s wide, dark eyes.

Geno sucks his bottom lip between his teeth. “You could be going out with me,” he says.

Patrice frowns irritably. He’s not good at navigating this kind of attentive tenacity all focused on him, and it makes his palms itch.

“It’s not that easy.”

Geno stuffs both hands into his jeans pockets. “You take time,” he says at last. “You think about it. I ask again later.”

“What if I’m just saying no now?” Patrice asks.

“I like kiss,” Geno says, unperturbed. “You like kiss, Bergy?”

Patrice glances at him. “It sounds weird when you call me that.”

Geno laughs. “Maybe I call you Prince Patrice, instead. Look like you need a crown, sometimes.”


“Answer the question, Prince Patrice.”

“Stop calling me that.” Patrice rolls his eyes. “Yes, I liked it. I wouldn’t keep doing it if I didn’t, but-”

“Then you just think about kiss, and maybe sometime later, I ask again.” Geno bends and brushes a quick kiss against Patrice’s cheek. “You have good night, Prince Patrice. Get home safe.”


Geno turns and Patrice watches him retreat back down the beach.

And then Patrice is alone again with the lake and the night and the gentle hiss and tumble of swells.
lapping at the pebbly shore. He strains his eyes at nothing as he tries to make out the distant spit of land he knows is out there, but finally gives up and turns back toward the crowd and the warmth; feeling foolish, but unwilling to risk being swallowed up by the vast unknown.
December: Johnny

Chapter Notes

Happy Thursday! <3

My reward for surviving this week is gonna be eating three pints of Halo Top in rapid succession and nitpicking the crap out of the next twenty or so chapters of this beast until I pass out cuddling my spoon.

Johnny starts eating lunch in the front seat of his truck. It’s one of the most cowardly things he’s ever done, but the idea of facing Pat and the guys in the cafeteria makes his stomach churn.

He ends up toying with his food with the radio turned down low, gazing out the window where he has a view of the courtyard in front of the cafeteria. It’s chilly, but there are still little groups of students eating at the patio tables, jacketed against the wind. Once or twice he thinks he catches a glimpse of Pat’s reddish-blond head in the crowd, but he looks away reflexively, and can’t find it again when he looks back.

A tap on the window a minute or two before the bell is supposed to ring nearly makes him jump, and he looks over to find Seabs staring concernedly at him through the glass.

“Hey kid,” he says, when Johnny rolls the window down enough for them to talk. “What’re you doing out here?”

“Studying,” Johnny says, quickly, instantly conscious of the fact that he’s got no books or school things even with him in the cab.

Seabs frowns, first at Johnny, then at his nearly untouched sandwich, still sitting on the dash. “Studying,” he echoes skeptically. “Where’s Pat?”

“All dunno,” says Johnny, willing Seabs to please just go away, or for the stupid bell to ring already, or something, anything, to keep him from having to talk about it. No such luck, and Seabs keeps looking at him with that pinched little frown until finally Johnny adds, “We had a fight.”

“Oh,” Seabs says, with a wince. “Ouch. Sorry, man. You’d better be able to get your shit sorted for practice, though. I think you’re doing special teams today.”

Johnny nods, mouth dry as sandpaper when he finally manages, “Yeah, um. It was a little while ago. We’ve been keeping it off the ice, I think it’ll be fine.”

“Cool,” says Seabs. “Oh hey, there’s the bell. I’m heading in the help Coach set up, I’ll catch you later, dude.”

“Yeah, sure,” Johnny says to Seabs’ already retreating back. He rolls the window back up and collects his uneaten lunch.

Before Johnny knows it, the final bell of the day is ringing. The tight ball of nerves he’s been carrying around doesn’t even feel like dread anymore, so much as resignation, and he walks quietly along with Crow, Ray down the long walkway out to the rink.
“Want some?” Crow asks, holding out a bag of peanut butter crackers. Johnny just shakes his head, but Ray makes grabby hands until Crow relinquishes the bag to him. “Hey man, you okay?”

Johnny shrugs. “I’ll be fine,” he says, dropping his bag off when they get to the dressing room and digging his skates out of his cubby.

“Yeah?” says Ray, leaning around Crow to peer dubiously at him, still chewing. “Because you look like someone shit in your cornflakes this morning.”

“I didn’t have cornflakes,” Johnny tells him, not looking up from where he’s tugging on his pants, and Ray gives a mirthless snort.

“Not really my point,” he says, but he lets it drop, and Crow doesn’t push either, even though Johnny can feel them both watching him as they finish dressing and head out onto the ice.

Whatever, he wants to tell Seabs, Johnny knows that practices have been getting increasingly awful, and he can feel the storm brewing even before he gets called into the office. He’s still in full gear, but he takes a seat in one of the beat-up old desk chairs and does his best to meet Coach’s eyes.

“So,” Coach Mayers says, raising his eyebrows. “You and Kane had a fight.”

Johnny’s whole skin goes cold, even as he’s sweating under layers of gear and fabric.

He says, “Yeah,” for lack of any better option.

“Uh-huh. And what’d I tell you when you two started doing your thing, way back in freshman year?” Coach Mayers leans back in his seat, surveying Johnny like he knows exactly how these words make Johnny’s skin crawl.

“You said we’d better know what we were doing, and that whatever we were doing, we’d better keep it the hell off your ice.”

“Good memory,” says Coach.

“Yeah,” Johnny says again. He stares down at his hands in his lap.

“Hey.” When Johnny looks up, Coach Mayers has him fixed with a scrutinizing stare. The sharp edge is gone from his voice when he asks, “Is everything okay with you?”

Johnny shrugs. “It will be.”

Coach Mayers looks at him silently for a long moment more, making the hair at the back of Johnny’s neck prickle. Finally he says, “Well, I sure hope so. Because it was all over my ice today, and that’s not fair to your teammates. It wastes all of our time and energy when you two do this, so get it together.”


“Well, try harder then,” Coach Mayers tells him, not altogether unkindly. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Coach,” Johnny says. That hadn’t gone nearly as badly as anticipated, although the walk back into the dressing room is every bit as uncomfortable. There’s a brittle hush in the normally raucous room that he ignores, returning to his cubby to finish changing without making eye contact with anyone. Johnny is plenty familiar with being talked about; he got used to the unsubtle whispers and muttering years ago. He just isn’t used to it coming from his own teammates anymore.
“Everything cool?” murmurs Ray, and Johnny nods mutely, concentrating on peeling off his gear.

Pat is studiously keeping his back turned, but even from across the room Johnny can feel him stealing glances.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, it wasn’t a big deal. Hey, nice job today.”

Ray beams, taking a swig from his water bottle. “Thanks man. Hey, what’re you up to now? Me and Crawdaddy are gonna hang out for a bit and get some extra practice in. If you felt like sticking around and taking some shots, that’d be super helpful.”

“Only if you want to,” says Crow. He smiles disarmingly, giving Johnny the distinct impression of premeditated plans.

Johnny glances over to where Pat is now joking around loudly with Shaw and Leddy, playing keepaway with one of Shaw’s skate guards, and nods. “Yeah, guys. Sure. Let me just get my skates back on and I’ll meet you out there.”

There’s a newfound lightness, being back out on the ice after such a terrible practice. Or maybe it’s just the lack of his usual sweaty gear weighing him down.

Johnny does a couple of sprinting laps to get his feet back under him. He feels free; freer than he has in days, with the huge, cavernous belly of the arena magnifying the rhythmic scrape-scrape of his blades over the ice and bouncing the echoes back at him.

“Yo!” Ray’s shout cuts through Johnny’s meditation. “When you’re done winning the 500-meter dash, we’ve got a bucket of pucks over here with your name on it.” He holds up a five-gallon Home Depot bucket.

“Go for the glove side,” Ray calls, once Johnny has collected his stick and taken up a position in front of Crow, hunkered down and waiting in the net. “That’s where he needs the most work.”

“You’re hilarious, Emery,” Crow shouts back as Ray skates off up the ice, laughing loudly at his own joke. He nods to Johnny. “Alright, man. Go for it.”

They stay out for nearly an hour, Ray and Crow switching out every so often as Johnny takes shot after shot until his shoulder aches and his hands starts to feel raw in their gloves.

As they finally head back into the empty dressing room, Crow gives Johnny a friendly thump on the arm with his gloved hand, nearly overbalancing him into the wall. “Thanks, Cap,” he says, grinning brightly, and Johnny smiles back in spite of himself.

“Thanks yourself,” Johnny tells him, grabbing the towel out of his bag and using it to wipe himself down. “You guys were doing most of the work.”

Ray rolls his eyes, plunking down on the bench opposite them to start unbuckling his pads. “So modest.”

“Always,” agrees Crow.

“Ha ha,” says Johnny. “I just mean, I needed the extra practice today.”

Crow’s expression clouds over. For a moment he looks distinctly uncomfortable before finally asking, “So uh, Coach gave you some shit in there, then?” He jerks his chin to indicate Coach Mayers’ closed office door.
“A little,” Johnny admits. “He was right, though. I’ve been off.”

Ray snorts loudly. “You weren’t the only one, dude, and I didn’t see him yanking Kane in there.”

Johnny tenses, can’t help it, biting his lip. He’s out of excuses, out of words entirely, it seems, and the silence just stretches on as he can feel their eyes trained on him.

Finally, Crow says, “Dude, it’ll be fine. You know Coach, he’s not gonna pull any shit with you. He’ll be fair, if you work with him.”

He means well, Johnny knows he does, but it doesn’t stop the building frustration that makes him want to shout at them both that this isn’t their fucking business. That they need to stop staring at him like that, with those sympathetic, pitying expressions before he starts throwing things.

“We broke up.” It’s the first time Johnny has said the words out loud, and they ring in his ears as his stomach twists uncomfortably. “It wasn’t just a fight. I didn’t tell Coach, though.” He glances up at their stunned faces, forcing his own expression to remain impassive. “I guess we’ll have to figure it out.”

“But,” says Crow, in a hushed voice, “this is you guys, man. You were like, all serious and stuff.”

All of the tension that Johnny had managed to work out during their extra practice session seems to settle back into his body at once, weighing him down. He pushes the damp hair back off his forehead and just gives a dejected shrug.

“That’s fucked up,” says Ray, quietly.

“Um, you wanna come to dinner with us or something?” Crow asks, and he sounds so awkward suddenly that it makes Johnny’s stomach turn. Like he’s suddenly something to tread lightly around and handle delicately, like an eggshell. Or possibly a landmine.

“No,” he says vehemently, and then, in a more measured tone, “uh. I mean, no thanks. My parents are expecting me home, and I have to work on a project for English. Maybe another time?”

Geno works his shifts in the restaurant. He goes to school, to practice, does his homework, wins their Friday night game against Ovi and his boys at Capital. He can’t stop thinking about Patrice.

He’d thought he felt a shift; a faint but distinct recalibration of the way they’d shared space, but later, in the chilly light of day, the idea felt foolish. Patrice was still ambivalent as ever, and Geno...the best Geno can do is to hope this is really something he wants. He thinks about Patrice’s face, pale and pretty, even with the pinched little line of his mouth; of the warm pressure of Patrice’s fingers curled against his palm.

He thinks about it so much that Sid starts throwing wadded up bits of paper at his head during pre-calc to get his attention, and Nealer starts casting him hurt looks during lunch when Geno isn’t paying enough attention to laugh at his story about trying to ride on the hood of Duper’s car through the Taco Bell drive through.

He thinks about it so much that when he pulls up in front of Starbucks on Tuesday after practice and sees Patrice sitting in the window, he’s nearly positive that his mind is playing tricks on him.

Patrice is curled up in one of the big maroon armchairs that clashes magnificently with his pink pants, and Geno is gaining more and more confidence in the theory that this guy dresses himself in the dark most days.

He seems focused on his phone, but as Geno watches, a woman wanders by behind him with her charger cable in hand, and suddenly he’s getting up and unplugging his own and waving her at the vacated outlet with an easy smile.

Suddenly very aware he’s been staring, Geno ducks back out of sight, looping around the long way and slipping in through the far entrance by the bathrooms. His first thought is of blazing a path right over to the little window alcove Patrice is occupying and sweeping him off his proverbial feet with some new debonair and self-assured go-on-a-date-with-me speech.

Of course, that would require actually being at all debonair. And confident. And, preferably, having solid grasp of the English language. Geno makes it as far as the display stand of blonde roast before realizing that he possesses none of these things.

Instead, he waffles for a minute, doing a laser-stare at the back of Patrice’s head until the barista behind the counter clears her throat loudly, and he’s jarred back to reality. Back from a place where maybe, if he could just slay a giant, fire-breathing dragon or something to win Patrice’s affection, it might be easier than this.

Geno mumbles something about venti drip with room for milk, stumbling over the "v" sound as usual, and then shuffles over to the pickup counter to wait, and look anywhere except the window alcove.

He gets his coffee and and pours and stirs various things into it until it resembles less coffee and more a cinnamon-flavored sugar syrup monstrosity that would make Sid cry.

He thinks very hard about leaving.

He stares at the doors, and his car outside the front windows in the parking lot, and finally he glances over to the alcove again.
He wants things.

Taking a long, scalding, blisteringly sweet sip of his coffee for courage, Geno marches over, depositing himself in the empty chair across from Patrice and announcing, "Hi," possibly much too loudly.

Patrice looks up, fumbling his phone and doing a doubletake.

"Uh," he says. And then, "What." And finally, very obviously trying to edit himself, "Hey."

It's not the worst start Geno could have hoped for. All magazine stands remain intact and nobody is bleeding, so he gains a little confidence.

"Watched you through window," he tries, and then instantly has to replay the sentence six or seven times through his head to try and figure out why Patrice’s expression suddenly looks like it does.

"I come here for coffee," he adds hastily, holding up his cup as evidence. “Then I see you and I think should say hi."

Patrice is still looking at him like Geno has two heads, but he nods slowly."Hi."

It's weird and disconcerting and kind of crushing, how Patrice’s entire body language still changes in Geno’s presence. Even around random strangers with their phone charger cables he looks more relaxed than he does now.

As soon as Geno sits down, Patrice might as well be wearing a flashing neon CLOSED sign around his neck. And here Geno had felt like they were making progress.

Not that Geno has ever been easily deterred. He earned his captaincy; he makes insurmountable challenge his bitch on a daily basis by virtue of language barrier alone. They may not be able to hold a sober conversation in daylight yet, but he's already made this kid come twice, and that has to count for something.

He smiles winningly and sets down his cup, undeterred by the straight line of Patrice’s lips, the set of his shoulders, and the way he won’t quite meet Geno’s eyes.

"Not seeing you at Capital party last weekend," Geno tries, and is thrilled to discover that his voice manages to control itself.

Patrice fiddles with the sleeve on his cup. "Because I wasn't there," he says shortly, but then seems to check himself and adds in a softer voice, "I was busy. Had stuff the next morning."

Geno grins. "Was good choice, then. Never any good, morning after Capital parties."

Patrice looks for a second like he's about to smile, too, but it never quite gets there. He just huffs.

"Whatever. I could probably stand to drink less, anyway."

Geno hears himself snort derisively, and wow, they really don't bring out the best in each other. Maybe this is actually a really, really terrible plan.

But Patrice looks up when Geno snorts, with those earnest, dark eyes. Suddenly, all Geno can think about is how badly he wants Patrice to look at him like he looked at the lady with the cell phone charger, all friendly and bright and open.

Or, maybe not exactly like that.
He just wishes Patrice would stop shutting him down; stop going brittle and tight as thin ice. He's never thought of himself as a threatening person, even in games, and it's starting to freak him out a little that he can have this effect on someone like Patrice.

Even Jonathan Toews clearly likes this guy, and Madison and Causeway are usually about ten minutes from engaging in guerrilla warfare. Then again, Jonathan Toews also seems to like Patrick Kane, so maybe Geno should reconsider using him as a character reference.

Patrice clears his throat stiffly, and Geno is mortified to realize he’s been staring again.

"Go on date with me," he blurts. The big, dark beach had somehow made it feel a lot simpler than it does now.

Patrice just looks at him, eyebrows drawn together.

Geno straightens his back and tries to look confident. "You want to go out with me, on date? Real date," he adds, even as he hears his English getting worse by the sweaty-palmed second. He lowers his voice and adds, "Not angry outside fighting, or party bathroom. Real, nice date. I pay."

Patrice glances away again, worrying at his cup sleeve with a thumbnail. "It's not that simple," he says, and when Geno still looks politely questioning, he adds, "I told you before. It would be a bad idea."

Geno says, "I just ask," holding his palms up. "You say no, but I ask again. You say yes soon."

Patrice rolls his eyes. "No, I won't."

"Is okay," says Geno. He gets up, taking another gulp of coffee. "You take time for think. Is good idea, you realize, then we talk later. Goodbye, Patrice."

He somehow manages to make it out the door and to his car without tripping or knocking into anything or otherwise embarrassing himself, which is great, because he can feel Patrice's eyes on him, following him and his car until after he's turned out of the parking lot.
December: Patrice

Chapter Notes

Have fun, people! It has been A Day.

The annual division scrimmage is a pain in the ass. It’s also great, because it means a whole day of outdoor hockey at a local park north of Madison, with cocoa and horsing around between matches, but it’s also a pain in the ass.

Patrice knows it's supposed to promote friendship and goodwill and whatever between divisional teams, and keep off-ice rivalries to a minimum, and the parents and boosters just love it. Someday, though, he’s going to record what his locker room sounds like the week before, just to clear up any misconceptions.

He's had to threaten to bench Marchy three times in the last two practices for coming up with increasingly elaborate schemes to sabotage MTL, while Segs has gone all creepy-quiet, making Patrice even more nervous than if he were openly recruiting for another tp'ing mission on the MadTech coach's car. But he puts on a brave face and helps organize Causeway's end of the refreshments situation, and he makes sure the freshmen and JV kids all have their mouth guards and extra stick tape, and know where the park bathrooms are.

Causeway's first match is against Madison, and Bollig's freshman nearly gets himself killed trying to take down Marchy and Segs and Patrice at once, singlehandedly, after losing his stick in a scuffle. He seems perfectly content to just bleed everywhere and ignore the refs trying to wave him over for medical attention, so no harm done, in the end.

Madison ends up winning by a goal, but Causeway takes down Edmonton and even MTL by generous margins, so Patrice is feeling pretty good about himself and his team when he heads over to take his turn manning the cocoa booth. Down the hill he can see Marchy and the still-bloody Madison Freshman getting into it again by the picnic tables, but Bollig seems to materialize out of nowhere and Marchy immediately backs off.

Patrice is smirking down at where now the kid seems to be berating Brandon for intervening when he hears "Hi," and looks up to see Evgeni Malkin looming over him with that familiar wary smile. Their teams didn’t have matchups today and somehow, in all of the hubbub of planning and organizing leading up to the actual event, Patrice hadn’t even thought about how, oh right, the guy was bound to be wandering around here somewhere.

He sits up straighter in his folding chair, very aware of how his hair dried all funny under the booth’s heat lamps, and the cocoa stain on his pants.

"Hey Ev-- Gen-- Uh. ...Malkin. Hi." He falters, strongly considering just running away and spending the rest of the afternoon punching himself in the face. Somehow, he masters the urge. “Hot cocoa is two dollars, and it's fifty cents extra for marshmallows.”

Which is exactly what it says on the sign propped helpfully in full view on the table in front of him. Great start, Bergeron. Good hustle. He wants to die, kind of.
For a second, Geno looks like he's about to laugh. Honestly, Patrice wishes he would. Then he could just get pissed, which would be a great distraction from this current cocktail of gut-wrenching despair, embarrassment, and confusion.

Geno just digs around in his pocket and produces three dollars, handing them over. "With marshmallow," he says decisively, and then stands there patiently while Patrice gets his change and messes around with the hot water dispenser and packets of Swiss Miss.

Geno waits patiently through the entire process, not saying a word, but when Patrice reaches out to hand the cup over, Geno curls both hands around it, trapping Patrice’s between them and the almost-too-hot styrofoam. It's something that might be awkward from someone built smaller, but Geno's hands are big and sure, and so is his voice when he says, "I ask again. Go on date with me, Patrice?"

Patrice’s cheeks feel about as hot as the cup, which Geno finally takes from his hands, stepping back and watching him expectantly.

And it's infuriating, it really is. Geno is infuriating. Patrice has got exactly no experience with this kind of thing, with this kind of persistence, and before he knows what he's doing, he's saying, "What the hell is wrong with you? Seriously, why are you still trying after what I said the other day?"

His voice is meaner, sharper than he's used to ever hearing it; that tone only Geno seems to bring out, and he can feel the sick, shameful tide rising up in him again.

"Because still like you!" Now Geno's almost shouting, too. Patrice is really glad MTL is currently beating the shit out of Edmonton down on the ice right now, because it seems to be keeping the crowds distracted and away from his booth. "You think I’m lying? Acting? Not act, Bergeron. Not good actor, have better things to do than play pretend chase you."

He draws himself up, glaring, and Patrice tries to match it, but can't seem to force himself to meet Geno's eyes. There's a long, shaky moment during which Patrice is pretty sure he's about to get cocoa dumped on him, but then Geno shrugs.

"Fine. You really want me to stop? I stop." And just like that, he's walking off back down the hill to the stands.

Something snaps, Patrice feels it. He’s up on his feet, chair knocked over behind him, yelling, "Goddammit, wait! Fine, no, I don't want you to stop. Shit, just...I'm done here at three. Wanna get coffee or. Or something?"

Geno turns and looks at him, eyes wide, and then he smiles. Patrice smiles back and that, finally, feels real. Like something that's been trapped waiting to get out of him for weeks now.

“I've been kind of a dick,” he adds, for good measure, because it’s been way too long and Geno hasn’t said anything yet. “I’m sorry.”

And then Geno smiles bigger; broad and effortless and bright as the sun on the ice behind him, and he says, "I meet you in parking lot at three fifteen, Prince Patrice," before he keeps walking down to a clustered group of Consol guys near the end of the stands.

Something in Patrice's chest billows like a sail, even as he's laughing, yelling "Why the hell do you keep calling me that?" But Geno doesn't turn, just keeps walking til he's absorbed by the cluster of his team, and Patrice loses sight of him.
Segs and Davy have been manning the snack booth, and Patrice wanders over as soon as Thorty switches him out at three o’clock.

Segs is chatting over the counter with a group of girls, but when he sees Patrice he waves.

“Bergy! Hey, man. Where’ve you been?”

The girls move along down the row of concession stands, and Segs comes out from behind the counter to meet him, holding out his fist for Patrice to bump.

“How chocolate booth,” Patrice says, jerking his head up the hill behind them. “I told you like five times this morning.”

Segs shrugs. “Lots going on today. Hey, did you see Edmonton getting beat by MTL a little while ago? Oof.”

“Yeah, I did,” says Patrice. “Hey, so I’m done here and I’ve got some stuff to do. Looch is in charge of cleanup, so I’m just gonna head out early, but I thought I’d let you know.”

Technically, it’s not a lie. Technically, Patrice is entirely within his rights to keep a date with Evgeni Malkin to himself. So technically, that sick twist of shame he feels saying this to Segs needs to go the fuck away.

“Cool, okay,” Segs says. Patrice wonders if he was even listening.

A couple of booths over, Patrice sees a cluster of vaguely familiar guys in Consol colors break away and head back down toward the stands. His heart does something floppy and obnoxious between his ribs.

“We could hang out later, maybe?” Segs asks, watching him hopefully.

Patrice feels like a dick when he says, “Yeah, uh, maybe. I dunno how long this stuff is gonna take me.”

“Sure,” says Segs, but his face falls.


Segs perks back up. “Just us?” he asks.

Patrice nods. “Just us. And Marchy, maybe, if he wants to come.”

“Deal,” says Segs. He salutes, grinning. “Now go on, get out of here.”

Patrice does. He makes it up to the parking lot right on time, and spots Geno leaning against an older model Camry parked underneath the big weeping willow, bare winter branches dancing across the hood as the afternoon breeze begins to pick up.

He smiles when he Patrice, but he doesn’t make a move, which means Patrice has to close the space between them. There’s the occasional sting of a snowflake against his bare cheek, giving Patrice a good excuse to curl arms tight around himself, as he tries to quell his jittery nerves.

"Where are we going?" he asks.

"Depends on you," Geno says. He smiles, all broad and easy. He looks happy. "You want food or coffee?"
Patrice tries not to seem like he’s staring. "Food, please," he says, because oh right, answering questions is a lot more attractive than awkward gawping. “I had, like, five cups of cocoa today just to stay warm. I think I’m good on liquids.”

Geno smiles at him again and Patrice’s cheeks flush with warmth.

“Good,” he says. “Get in, I turn on heater. You look like ice cube.”

Patrice laughs nervously, and the anticipation in him crashes like a wave.

At a red light, Geno glances over. “You still cold?” he asks.

Patrice shakes his head, scrunching down a little more in his seat to get the full effect of the air vent trained on him from from the dash. “Nah, thanks. This is good.”

“Good.” The light changes and they start moving again, but Geno reaches over without taking his eyes off the road and curls fingers around Patrice’s hand. The rough pad of Geno’s thumb traces small circles across the ridge of his knuckles, and something in him loosens and gives way.

They drive through Madison township, and across Causeway, heading south. Neither of them says much, but Patrice barely notices, the thoughts ratcheting around his head at warpspeed. Ten minutes later, they’re pulling into the parking lot for a place that says Tatyana's in fading lettering on the awning.

“Where are we?” Patrice asks.

Geno shrugs, palm pressed lightly to Patrice's back as he guides him in. It's better on the inside, less shabby than the exterior, and warmed by cheerful lamps on the bright red tablecloths.

"Owned by friends of my family," Geno says, by way of explanation. “Bread is amazing."

He leans close when he speaks, private and hushed under the ambient kitchen-clatter, and it's easy for Patrice to lean back into him and enjoy the warm, solid weight at his back. Geno’s warm breath at his ear makes him think about how easy it would be to just turn, lean in, fit their mouths together.

"You brought me here for the bread?" Patrice asks, mostly just to distract himself from this train of thought.

Geno shakes his head. "No, I bring you here because it's good, and Alex has hockey practice now, so I know he not coming to bother us. Not as good as my Mama’s restaurant, but we make do."

Patrice looks up from his menu, caught off guard. “Your mom has a restaurant?”

It’s something he's never even considered. That Geno has a life and a family and all these normal, everyday things that never really occur to you about a person when you’re too distracted by fighting or fucking them.

“Yeah.” The waitress returns with a basket of warm bread, and Geno pushes it toward him before taking a piece for himself. “Bigger than this, and best piroshki.” He glows with pride.

Geno orders them borscht and something involving thin slices of beef and a lot of onion that’s warm and filling and leaves the aftertaste of dill on Patrice’s tongue. Also, the bread, of course; thick, crusty stuff, with an overwhelming smell of rye and yeast. Geno laughs and signals the waitress for another basket after Patrice almost singlehandedly demolishes the first.
“This is really good,” he says, unnecessarily, as Geno prods the fresh basket at him across the table.

"I know,” Geno says. “But I’m glad you like, too.”

He waggles his eyebrows, grinning. Patrice reaches out to swat him, but Geno catches his hand over the table, and that’s -- woah, that’s something.

It’s a weird time of day, late for lunch but early for dinner, and they’re the only ones in the restaurant besides the waitress, who is nowhere to be seen. Patrice swallows hard, taking another sip of his ice water with his free hand, and tries not to think of what the warmth of Geno’s palm means, or what it’s doing to his stomach.

A moment later, however, Geno lets go and leans back. There’s color high in his cheeks and he sounds flustered when he asks, “You want anything else?”

“No thanks,” says Patrice. Except maybe Geno’s hand back on his. “I’m stuffed.”

“Russian food good for cold days,” Geno agrees.

Geno insists on paying, waving off Patrice’s protests. “This one my idea, so I pay. You pick next time, I let you pay.”

Next time.

Patrice doesn’t know what else to say, so he just says, “Okay, cool.” Next time.

Only, Geno's credit card gets rejected. He gets flustered in Russian, and in English, until their waitress finally shouts him down. "No, no, hasn't been rejected, is all paid for. Is good."

"Is good?" Geno asks, reaching for the card as she holds it out for him.

"Ms. Tatyana in kitchen, she say your money no good here, Malkin. You know that. What would Alex say?"

Geno laughs. "Alex say 'He pay double!'"

Their waitress giggles. Then she glances at Patrice and says something in Russian that makes Geno blush, replying with a nervous laugh before getting up.

“What?” Patrice demands, tugging his coat around himself as he follows Geno back outside. “What was that, what’d she say?”

Geno opens Patrice’s door for him. "She ask -- she want to know who handsome boy with me is. She say need sunglasses just to look at you, ask if you’re single."

"Um," says Patrice. He punches Geno on the shoulder, because it's easier than doing anything else. “Oh, come on, you’re so full of shit.”

Geno swats his hand away, chuckling. “Usually yes, but I not joke about this. You too handsome for joking.”

Patrice has no idea how to respond to this. Has no idea what to say. So instead he just leans in over the emergency brake, pressing a soft kiss to Geno’s laughing mouth.

He’s still not sure what this is, or what he wants it to be, but he knows he likes this. Likes the way Geno’s lips part for him and how he offers up just enough tongue to leave Patrice wanting more.
Geno’s hands are big and steady, and one settles at Patrice’s waist, fingertips just brushing beneath the hems of Patrice’s jacket and assorted layers, and making his stomach do a series of giddy swoops.

They finally break apart, glassy-eyed and breathing quick.

Patrice says, “Huh.”

“Yeah,” agrees Geno.

Patrice’s parents had dropped him off at the scrimmage, so he just directs Geno through the quiet outskirts of Causeway.

"This your house?" Geno asks, peering out at a two-story colonial revival where they’ve stopped at a cul de sac.

"Uh," Patrice laughs nervously. "No. I'm actually that one." He points four houses up the block. "I thought this'd be easier." Geno gives him a scrutinizing stare and he hurries to add, "I'm not-- it's not you, I swear. I just. I've never really dated, and I'm not ready to start answering questions if my parents see...anything."

Geno's frown instantly shifts, changing into something Patrice thinks he might be smart to worry about. "Oh. So then it’s safe here, nobody see, nobody ask question." And he leans over, fingers resting easily on the curve of Patrice’s neck, and kisses him.

Patrice could get used to this. All the confusion and ambivalence and general panic aside, he could seriously get used to Geno’s tongue in his mouth.

He's kissing back, letting himself go with it. It's almost comical how easy this is.

He laughs, hears himself giggling into Geno's mouth, which instantly pulls away from his, Geno looking at him with that worried look again, eyebrows drawn.

"No, no," Patrice is still giggling, flapping his hand to try and dispel that stupid pre-freakout look Geno's wearing. "I'm-- I'm sorry, I'm just. I feel so dumb!" He's fluent in two languages and he still feels like he's fumbling for words. "I know why this could be a bad idea, I do, but right now it all just seems so...dumb. All of that crap before." He's still giggling a little, ducking his head and grinning and looking up at Geno with that billowing feeling again, like he could just rise up; set sail.


Patrice isn't really sure what to say to that, so he socks Geno in the arm again, not as hard this time, and leans in for another kiss, because he can.
Johnny scores eleven minutes into the game with Causeway, an intoxicating lightness and relief flooding through him like he’d forgotten it could. Bicks shouts, pumping a fist into the air in celebration, and Johnny puts his arm out in anticipation of Pat’s usual tackling hug before he even realizes what he’s doing. There’s an awkward pause, Pat moving in like he’s as much on autopilot as Johnny, but then he hesitates, grin going a little stiff, and punches Johnny’s arm instead.

“Nice one,” he shouts, over the noise around them. “Fucking beauty.”

He’s gone before Johnny can respond, following Bicks back to the bench to trade out shifts, and once they’re all settled again, silence reasserts itself between them.

Johnny doesn’t think much of it. For the first time in weeks, his attention is completely diverted. He jumps up and shouts when Carbomb nets the next one, and then groans along with the rest of the team in the second period when Patrice manages to break through Leddy, Saad, and Shaw and break their lead in half. Patrice’s eyes find Johnny on the bench, grinning at him over his teammates’ shoulders as Johnny rolls his eyes and flips him off.

Carbomb sees it, leaning over to elbow Johnny in the ribs and mutter into his ear, “Let’s wipe that smile off your buddy’s face, eh?”

Johnny snorts a laugh, but the momentum propels him over the boards and out onto the ice for his next shift, a new burst of speed and ferocity in his stride.

There’s something off, though, he can feel it. Pat has been half a step behind the play all game, out of sync with Johnny and Bicks. He looks stiff on the puck, none of his usual confidence and quick hands, and when he fumbles an easy pass from Bicks for the third time, Johnny begins to worry.

He isn’t the only one, either. Back in the Causeway visitors’ dressing room during the second intermission, Coach Mayers rounds on Pat.

“Kane,” he barks, as everyone mills around, toweling off and getting drinks. It’s like someone hits a pause button, movement around the room stilling as all eyes land on Pat, frozen with a bottle of Powerade halfway to his lips. “You’re on third line until further notice. Carcillo, I want you to take his place on right wing.”

“What-- But Coach--” Pat sputters, before Coach cuts him off.

“I don’t want to hear it,” he says, standing over Pat while everyone else in the immediate vicinity shrinks away. “You had all week to get your shit together, I want to see you show me you still want it. And you two,” he rounds on Johnny and Bicks, who seems somehow diminished under Coach Mayers’ steely glare, “watch your communication entering the zone. We’re faster than Causeway
tonight, but it’ll get us nowhere if you guys have your heads too far up your asses to figure out where your linemates are on the rush.”

“Yes, Coach,” Johnny says, and Bicks hastily echoes him, keeping his head ducked low.

“Fantastic,” Coach says, still sounding a lot more like a drill sergeant than usual. “We’ve had about double the chances they have, the score should be at least four to one by now. Defense, keep up the good work, and let’s try to actually capitalize in the last twenty minutes, okay? They’re gonna be hungry, don’t let them push you around.”

He casts another glare in Pat’s direction, and even while pretending not to look, Johnny can’t help but see the way Pat goes even paler. He gives a quiet, tight little nod, and hurriedly tucks his earbuds into his ears as Bicks goes over, settling next to him on the bench.

Johnny doesn’t even register Carbomb taking Bicks’ vacated spot next to him until he says, “Man. That was fucking harsh, huh?”

“Yeah,” says Johnny, quietly. He glances over to where Coach is now conferring with the collected defense, going over something on his coach board.

Carbomb follows Johnny’s gaze, lingering on Coach for a moment before flicking over to where Pat is still hunkered down, staring blankly down at the phone in his hands while a tinny, unidentifiable beat seeps from his headphones. “I think Coach was just trying to give him a kick to the ass,” he says wisely.

“Sure, but there’s a time and a place,” Johnny says, and even he can hear the familiar, protective edge to his voice in defense of Pat. Even if he knows deep down that Coach is right. Pat operates differently than him, especially under pressure.

While Johnny hasn’t exactly been playing his best, he’d at least spent the intervening weeks since their breakup channeling all of his emotion into extra practices and harder workouts.

And Johnny is confident in calling it a breakup now; more than he was at first. At first, he wondered if it really was just a fight like innumerable others, but then the silence stretched on. They avoided each other in hallways, Johnny kept eating lunches in his truck, and at night, his phone sat silently on the nightstand while he did his homework.

Pat had simply decompensated. Johnny had watched helplessly in practices, not knowing how to help, or if he even wanted to at all.

Seeing him now, crumpled and pale as paper, Johnny can’t ignore the surge of sympathy that courses through him, and the aching urge to go over and try to say...something. He doesn’t know what. He doesn’t even know where to begin, or what he could possibly say to make any of this awful week alright. Bicks is already over there anyway, back to his usual enormous self, taking up space next to Pat on the dressing room bench like a silent, vigilant watchdog.

Carbomb eyes Johnny shrewdly, but he doesn’t say anything more. Just frowns a little, dark eyes narrowed like he can guess everything Johnny is thinking. It’s a relief when Coach finally straightens up and sets his board aside, calling, “Alright, back to the ice!” and they all troop back down the hall to take their places.

Johnny loses the first faceoff to Patrice, who still looks as smug as ever, but Madison manages to regain the puck and keep play in the Causeway end for the next couple of shifts. Coach had been right, Causeway is hungry for it, pushing back and trying to force them out into the neutral zone
every chance they get, for all the good it does them. Madison’s defense is solid, and Johnny has to hide how disappointed he is when the refs hurriedly break up a heated exchange between Shaw and Marchand, when the frustration boils over.

“Finally picking on someone your own size?” Bollig chirps, leaning down the bench to grin at Shaw as he takes a seat, still looking a little hot around the collar.

Shaw aims a squirt at Bollig from his water bottle, yelling, “Ha fucking ha, dickslap!” and Johnny escapes the ensuing chaos to take a shift between Carcillo and Bicks.

He’s played with Carbomb before, mostly in practices when Coach had wanted to shake things up. The three of them work well together, and Johnny is grateful for the added heft on their line, especially against Causeway’s left winger, Lucic, who’s roughly the size of a tanker truck.

Pat can usually skate circles around guys like that, but there’s some part of Johnny tonight that’s itching for the brutality of heavy hits and physical play. It doesn’t exactly open up their chances, but it’s easy to let himself sink into the visceral satisfaction of it.

Less satisfying is watching Pat play on the third line, skating left wing with Kruger and Frolik, and getting increasingly, visibly frustrated with himself on every missed chance, shoddy pass, and fumbled rebound.

Even with his gloves, Johnny can see the uncharacteristic death grip Kane has on his stick, and the stiff set of his shoulders. It’s difficult to sit quietly and wait for his shift and not to turn around and shout at Coach Mayers, ask him if this is what he’d intended with his little reality check; if he realizes he’s probably done more harm than good.

“Take a breath, man,” says Ray. He’s perched next to Johnny on the end of the bench, snapping his gum and glancing away from a scrum forming around Crow to grin at him. “You’re gonna start melting holes in the ice if you keep staring at it so hard.”

Johnny shakes himself, forcing a couple of deep breaths before saying, “I’m fine, man.”

“I know,” Ray says simply, refocusing on the action, where Crow has managed to swat the puck away to a waiting Frolik with a risky redirected stick save. “I know.”

He leaves it there, to Johnny’s relief, and a few minutes later the clock runs out and they’ve won, two to one. It doesn’t really feel like a win.

“Nice work,” Coach says, once they’re all back in the dressing room. His voice still has a harsh snap to it, but something seems to have shifted over the third period, and instead of lecturing them, he just adds, “We’ll go through notes on Monday. Have a safe night.”

“Party at my place,” Bicks says, once Coach has disappeared out into the hall with Dunc and Seabs in tow. “If anyone needs a ride, I can fit two more in my dad’s Jeep.”

Johnny doesn’t miss the glance Pat throws his way before saying, “Uh, me, I guess.”

Bicks picks up his towel and heads for the showers. “I’d already counted you in, dude. I meant two more besides you and Amanda.”

“Oh,” says Pat. “Cool, thanks.”

“Don’t sound so fucking excited,” comes Bicks’ voice, around the corner, but Pat doesn’t laugh. He just finishes stripping off his gear, and a minute later he follows Bicks for the showers.
For a few minutes, Johnny strongly considers not going. He could even text Patrice, see if he’s got anything going on with his boys, if he’d like to hit the diner or something. Maybe give him some shit for being such a smug asshole tonight.

In the end, though, he ends up following the caravan over to Bicks’ house with Johnny O. and Hjammer riding along with him, squabbling comfortably over DJ rights with Hjammer’s iPod.

Bicks’ parents are out of town for the weekend, and clearly have no illusions about what might go on in their absence. Johnny has been in this house enough to notice the conspicuous absence of fragile keepsakes on the mantle in the living room, and the wedding china from its usual glass-doored hutch in the hallway.

“We fucking beat Causeway!” Shaw yells, bounding into the kitchen where Johnny is pouring himself a rum and Coke and climbing halfway up Bollig to give him a noogie. “Hell yeah, motherfuckers! That’ll teach those chirpy shits, thinking they’ve got a chance against us. Fuck them.”

Bollig slings an arm around him, trying to fix his hair with his spare hand and blushing furiously even as he rolls his eyes. “Dude, we kinda got lucky.”

“Fuck that,” says Shaw dismissively, extricating himself from Bollig’s arm and grabbing a can of beer off the counter. “C’mon, Kaner, back me up here. We schooled those bitches.”

Johnny hadn’t even noticed Pat come in, but he turns in time to see Pat’s ears go pink, his smile wavering as he shrugs and mumbles, “Yeah man, we did okay.”

Shaw snorts, clearly bored by the lack of shit-talking. He retreats down the hall with his beer, Bollig in trailing along behind like he’s being tugged by some invisible magnetic force. Pat stands awkwardly as chatter resumes, finally making his way over to survey the liquor choices like he’s forgotten what he’s supposed to do with them.

“Here,” says Johnny, making the snap decision and going over to him, holding out his drink for Pat to take. “You like rum and Coke. I’ll just make another one.”

Pat glances up at him in surprise, reaching for the cup and taking a sip. “Hey,” he says quietly. “Thanks.” He gives Johnny a shy smile over the rim of the cup, and something in Johnny’s stomach seizes.

“No problem,” he says, pouring himself a new drink and tapping their cups together before taking a gulp. “Here’s to another win.”

Instead of brightening, Pat seems to deflate, only giving a little nod of acknowledgment before tipping his cup back and draining half in one go. “Right, yeah.”

Johnny regards him for a moment, frowning. “Hey,” he says, moving in so Pat can hear him over the mingled music and babble of the party. “What Coach said in there, reaming you out like that in front of all of us, it wasn’t fair.”

Pat is quiet for a long time, avoiding Johnny’s eyes in favor of gulping more of his drink. Finally he says, “He wasn’t wrong to knock me off top line, though.”

It’s not a question, and Johnny doesn’t bother disagreeing. “Doesn’t matter,” he says, instead. “He still shouldn’t have done it like that.”

Finally, Pat manages a weak smile, draining his cup and pouring himself another as Johnny leans back against the counter. “Thanks,” he says quietly. “And hey, at least we won, right?”
“Right,” says Johnny, firmly. “We fucking won!”

As if on cue, his phone buzzes in his back pocket. When he checks the message, it’s one word from Patrice. *Dick.*

Johnny laughs, and shows Pat the message.

“Tell him it’s too fucking bad nobody else on his sorry-ass team knows where the net is,” Pat says.

Johnny does, typing as Pat looks on over his shoulder, and gets back, *Whatever. See you guys in January, asshat.*

He pockets his phone after that, devoting most of his attention to finishing his drink and making another.

They do a round of shots with Bicks, and then another three with Emery and Crow, and Johnny is beginning to feel pleasantly light and floaty in his extremities. Pat is giggling at Ray, clutching his latest drink and slumping back against Johnny’s side.

“I gotta piss,” Johnny announces a few minutes later, finally mustering the resolve to prod Pat until he stands up on his own. “Gonna use the upstairs bathroom, I’ll be right back.”

“Nah, wait up,” Pat calls after him, stumbling a little and steadying himself on the lip of the counter in his haste to catch up. “I gotta go, too. We’ll take turns!”

Johnny laughs fuzzily, tripping up the first couple steps and nearly spilling what’s left in his cup. “Good, because pissing together would be weird,” he says, which only makes Pat giggle harder, leaning heavily on his arm.

Pat goes quiet again when they get upstairs, letting Johnny go first and then catching his wrist before he can head back down.

“Hey,” he says, eyes suddenly much clearer than they were a moment before, bright and blue. “You wanna hang out here a little while? It’s like, super loud down there. I need a minute.”

He’s not stupid. Even stumbling drunk, Johnny can see where this is headed. But he says, “Sure,” and watches relief filter through Pat’s expression.

“Bry’s room,” Pat says. He follows Johnny through the last door down the hall, setting his cup on the nightstand. “He won’t mind.”

“Won’t mind what?” Johnny asks, even as Pat leans up on tiptoe, muffling the last syllable between their mouths.

There’s a second’s pause that hangs heavy in the room around them. Johnny’s heart hammers in his ears. He feels Pat shaking against him.

“I want you,” Johnny hears himself say, just loud enough to break through the waiting silence. And it’s true, too, down to his bones. He wants his life back, or what had been his life, and he wants *them.*

“Want you, too.” Pat mumbles the words, hands curling tight into the fabric of Johnny’s sleeves and kissing him again.

They land in a heap on the bed with Johnny on top, Pat’s fingers already going for the buttons on his
shirt while Johnny grinds down against him. He’s hard, straining in his jeans, and Pat seems to pick
up on it right around the same time he does, abandoning the shirt buttons and fumbling for Johnny’s
fly instead. As soon as he gets them undone, Johnny shimmies out of the pants and kicks them off
the bed.

“What do you--” Johnny starts, but Pat is already asking in a rush, “Will you fuck me?”

Johnny pulls back, straddling Pat and dimly aware of the ongoing party sounds below them, bass-
beat echoing the pounding of his own blood in his ears. He pauses, sucking his lower lip, and finally
nods.

He wants it; wants to lose himself in this fragile, familiar moment. He wants to freeze it like a
picture, something to prove that everything he wants really existed.

“There’s lube in the nightstand drawer,” Pat says, and when Johnny looks down he’s smiling a little,
mouth bitten-red in a lopsided smile. “He doesn’t even try to hide it.”

Sure enough, when Johnny opens the top drawer he finds a tube of KY and an open box of
condoms. He pauses before picking one of the foil packets out of crumpled packaging, looking at it,
and then back to Pat.

Pat already has his pants off, legs pale and t-shirt rucked up where he’s flopped back on the bed. He
catches Johnny looking, but his smile fades when he sees the condom.

The moment draws taut as a bowstring, and Johnny thinks he can actually hear it snap. His head has
started to pound dully, his limbs heavy and ungainly as he flinches back from Pat’s reaching hand.
He doesn’t feel so drunk anymore.

“What,” Pat starts, but Johnny is shaking his head, dropping the condom back into the drawer and
shoving it shut. He starts fumbling, trying to re-button his shirt.

“I can’t.” His voice is dry and cracking, words crawling their way over his clumsy tongue. In his
head he can hear Pat’s voice, I hate you; see him kissing the red-haired girl by the lake. “Pat, I--”

Everything they’re clinging to here is already gone. Like that cartoon coyote chasing the roadrunner
off a cliff, hanging suspended in thin air for a too-long moment; only falling when he realizes there’s
nothing underneath.

Johnny is off the bed and moving before he even realizes it, fumbling around for his jeans and
tugging them back up, running hands through his hair. It’s wrong, this is wrong, it’s all wrong.

“Johnny,” Pat’s voice is terrible, pleading, like nothing he’s ever heard. He stumbles, trying to get
back into his pants hurriedly as Johnny moves for the door. “Johnny wait, what the fuck just
happened? What’s going on, Johnny, please!”

Pat is still drunk, tripping and stumbling into the wall in his haste to follow as he still fights with the
button on his pants, but Johnny can’t stop. Can’t look back, or the rage and hurt building inside him
might waver, for just a moment, and he doesn’t want that. For the first time in weeks he knows what
he wants. He wants Pat to feel this, too. For Pat to fully realize, like he does, just how fucking
broken they are, were, have been, for who knows how long.

“Johnny!” Pat screams it as they reach the foot of the stairs, grabbing for Johnny’s arm and forcing
him to turn as all around them people stop whatever they’re doing to watch. There are tear tracks
down Pat’s face, and his eyes are red-rimmed, and something in Johnny twists painfully, but he
yanks his arm back. “Johnny, fuck, please wait, please can we just-- Can we just talk about this? I
don’t even know what just happened.”

Johnny looks at him, ignoring the way people are gaping. He takes a deep breath in and pushes it back out, and says simply, “There’s nothing left to talk about.”

He turns and, for lack of a better option, makes his way down the crowded hall and out the front door, not stopping until he feels a hand on his arm again. Only this time, it isn’t Pat’s. It’s Bickell’s big hand digging in and forcing him around, shoving Johnny back into the porch railing and not hesitating a second in throwing a right hook at Johnny’s face.

“You piece of shit,” Bicks is shouting, and Johnny can just hear him over the ringing in his own ears, the hot throb of pain around his eye where Bicks’ fist had connected. “You fucking asshole, he cried over you! He’s been fucked up for weeks over whatever your selfish dickhead ass did to him.”

It’s quieter outside, too chilly for any partiers to have spilled out into the yard, and all Johnny can hear is the distant whistle of winter wind underneath their harsh breathing.

“What I did to him,” Johnny says. “Bry, he fucking cheated on me.”

For a long moment, Bicks just stares at him, mouth working like he’s chewing over this information. At last he says, “He’s my best friend. You think this is bad? I know you’re my captain, but you fuck with him again -- you even talk to him -- and I’ll kick your ass ‘til it’s black and blue.”

“Fair enough,” says Johnny, and finally feels Bicks’ grip on his arm loosen. He steps back. “See you Monday.”

He’s nearly at his truck by the time he hears a shout, someone calling his name. He keeps walking, speeding up and expecting Pat, or maybe Bicks deciding that one good hit hadn’t been enough. Instead, Crawford catches up with him, panting, and falls into stride.

“Dude,” he says, tugging Johnny’s sleeve. “Dude, hold up. Give me your keys.”

Johnny glares at him. “I’m fine, Corey. I’m sober enough, you can go back inside.”

Crow glares right back, grabbing for Johnny’s keys in his hand so Johnny nearly falls on his ass trying to stay out of reach. “Don’t be a dick, Toews. I’m not fighting with you, I’ve got your back. Now give me your fucking keys before I have to knock you down and take them from you.”

“You were drinking, too,” Johnny snaps defensively, but when Crow doesn’t back down, he finally sighs, holding the keys out.

“I had two shots like, an hour and a half ago,” Crow says, and true to his word, he doesn’t look at all drunk. “I’ve been playing darts on the back porch with Smith, I just came in when I heard all the shouting. What the hell was that?”

Johnny shrugs, climbing up into the passenger side and staring defiantly out the window as Crow adjusts the seat. “Pat and me had a fight.”

Even without looking, Johnny can feel the look Crow gives him.

“Duh,” Crow says, starting the truck and pulling off the curb onto the quiet, late-night residential street. “I’m pretty sure they know that like, two counties over. But what the fuck, man. I thought you guys were already...y’know.” He trails off, and Johnny snorts derisively.

“Broken up?”
“Yeah,” says Crow, but his voice is smaller now, apologetic. “Yeah, man. I thought you’d already gotten past all that.”

“Well, you thought wrong,” Johnny tells him, crossing his arms over his chest and leaning back, eyes shut. He can feel the left one beginning to swell shut where Bicks hit him, and the whole side of his face throbs hotly. “Apparently.”

“Apparently,” Crow echoes. He drives in silence for a few moments and then adds, “Man, I’m sorry.”

A sense of limitless, bleak emptiness is starting to lap at the corners of Johnny’s consciousness; the realization of final, palpable loss.

“It’s over,” he says, and then again, finally believing it, “it’s really over.”

--

Johnny wakes up after what feels like ten minutes to something heavy landing next to him on the mattress and flopping across his legs.

“Why?” he says without opening his eyes, or tries to say. His voice comes out in more of a hoarse, inarticulate croak. It tastes like something died in the back of his throat.

“Hey,” says David’s voice from somewhere down near Johnny’s shins. “Wake and bake?”

Johnny opens his eyes to David holding out a tiny glass one-hitter. “Uh,” he says, swallowing a couple of times until his tongue doesn’t feel so much like a wad of cotton, “are you insane? Mom and Dad are downstairs, aren’t they?”

“So open a window,” David says, rolling his eyes. “I just got this stuff and I was gonna give you first crack to like, ease your broken heart and shit. The goalie downstairs on our couch told me about last night,” he adds, in response to Johnny’s confused expression.

“Crow?” Johnny says, trying to force his sluggish brain awake so he can start making sense of everything. Memories of the night before, of yelling at Pat, the almost-sex, Crow driving him home, keep flitting through the peripheries of his mind like a half-remembered dream and he’s having trouble sorting out the details. “Why were you talking to him about me?”

David shrugs. “He was getting up to leave as I came in, and told me to tell you to text him when you wake up. He seemed really concerned about you, man.” He pauses, and then grins brightly. “Maybe you should go out with him, instead. He’s hot, right?”

“Oh my god!” Johnny groans, trying to aim a kick at David’s shoulder, but his feet only get tangled up in the sheet. “God, gross, could you please not try to play matchmaker for me? Or talk to me about guys on my team being hot? Or smoke in my room,” he says, lowering his voice to a hiss so their parents can’t hear. David at least has the decency to pause and look sheepish halfway through leaning over to wedge the window open. “Seriously, dude, what the fuck, it is too early for this.”

“I came over for breakfast.” David says, shrugging. “Mom’s making pancakes. Get your ass up and you can have some before you have to take off for soccer.”

Johnny watches David dig a lighter out of his back pocket, eyes narrowed. “How thoughtful.”

“I know,” says David. He wiggles the one-hitter between two fingers. “Should I assume you don’t wanna take the green?”
“No!” Johnny says. “I mean yes, you should assume that. You know if Mom catches you with that she’s gonna make you come back and live at home, right?”

David snorts, flicking the lighter and taking a drag. He holds it in for a long moment, finally blowing a stream of bluish-grey smoke out the window before replying. “No she won’t. And anyway, she’s not gonna catch me. Are you really sure you don’t want any? It’d make you feel better.”

“I’m really sure,” Johnny tells him flatly. “Thanks for the charity, asshole.”

“I’m not even going to say I told you so,” David says loftily. “But I will reiterate, that kid is a douche. You can do better, or whatever.”

“Or whatever,” Johnny echoes, around the queasy tightness in his chest. “Great. Thanks.”

David has the decency at least to wince apologetically, coughing a couple of times around another pull of smoke. He taps the dregs of ash from the bowl and shuts the window. “I mean it, man,” he says. “And fuck that Bickell kid, too. I always thought he seemed kinda cool. I can’t believe he punched you.”

“He--” Johnny nearly knocks David off the end of the bed in his hurry to look at himself in the mirror. “Oh shit.”

“Your goalie said it was like watching a scene out of Degrassi or something,” David puts in helpfully.

“You aren’t funny,” Johnny snaps. “And he isn’t my goalie, stop trying to play matchmaker the day after my breakup. Or any day, ever.”

“I meant ‘you’ as in your team,” David says, with a haughty sniff. “Besides, from what you’ve told me, you didn’t just break up. Last night was just the big finish or whatever. Grand finale. Cherry on the crap-sundae that is your life.”

“Thanks,” says Johnny loudly, before he can go on. He leans in and pokes a finger around the perimeter of the bruising. It throbs dully, and he winces. “God, this is bad. What am I gonna tell Coach? Shit, what am I gonna tell Mom?”

“Can’t you tell your coach the truth?” David asks, and although Johnny opens his mouth to retort, he can’t actually think of a decent argument.

“I mean, uh. Yeah, I guess?” he says slowly. “As long as he doesn’t hang Bryan out to dry for it.”

David lets out a derisive snort, flopping over and scooting around on the bed to repurpose Johnny’s vacated nest of blankets for himself. “And why the fuck not? He fucking punched you, didn’t he? Shouldn’t he pay for that?”

“No,” says Johnny, vehemently. “No, he didn’t know why we fought or anything, he just saw Pat crying and me leaving, and they’ve been best friends basically forever, so--”

“He was crying?” David interjects, making a face. “God, Corey wasn’t kidding. That is some after school special shit.”

“You’re not helping,” Johnny groans, leaning forward so his forehead thuds heavily against the dark wood of his bedroom door.

“Actually, you’re probably the one not helping that eye, banging your head on the door like that.”
Johnny makes an inarticulate noise of exasperation, but he stops and looks up, sighing. David meets his eyes with a heavy-lidded stare. “Sometimes,” Johnny tells him, “I hate you a little bit.”

“No, you don’t,” David says. “Without me, you’d still be lying up here moping and trying to list all the ways everything terrible that’s ever happened is your fault.”

“Actually I’d probably still be asleep,” Johnny says.

“And then you’d have missed pancakes. So come on, get your ass in gear and let’s go downstairs.” He throws Johnny’s covers off and bounds for the door before Johnny blocks him.

“Fuck, no, what about my face?” he turns again to inspect the damage, wondering how hard it would be to cover up if he could find their mom’s concealer. “Coach might understand, but Mom is going to flip out!”

David holds his hands up helplessly. “I don’t know, can’t you tell her the truth, too? She’s gonna see it sooner or later, might as well get it over with.”

“I just,” Johnny trails off lamely, racking his brain for a solution that doesn’t involve makeup. “I just really, really don’t want to talk about this stuff with her.”

David’s expression softens. He says, “Yeah. I get that. You realize you can just lie, right?”

“I...don’t really want to do that, either,” Johnny says, and David snorts.

“Well,” he says, reaching for the doorknob again, “then I don’t know what to tell you. But I’ve got a nice buzz going and I smell bacon, so you can stay up here and freak out some more if you want, but I’m going to get food.”

Johnny glares at him. “Fine,” he says, “fine, whatever. When I come downstairs, there had better still be bacon.”

“No promises,” David says, but he’s already out the door and doesn’t see Johnny flipping him off.
"Hey, asshole," Neal says, walking back into the locker room stark naked the last day before winter break.

Geno keeps his head down, messing with a grommet on his skate where the rounded metal edge is crimped from hard use.

It’s weird. You spend your whole life only ever being...you. The guys in the room in their various states of undress are only ever just bodies, like your own; various awkward angles and skin with loud mouths and bad hair. And nothing’s changed. Geno knows nothing has changed in here, but there’s something new under his own skin. Something that draws uncomfortably tight at the thought of what these same guys might think if they knew what was in his head.

Patrice’s body. Its sweet angles and pale skin, his wide, laughing mouth, and how his hair kept falling into his eyes when he’d looked up into Geno’s face, the moment before they kissed.

Patrice’s laugh. Quiet and self-conscious in Geno’s parked car.

Patrice’s hands. Quick and clever and full of possibility, and nearly everything Geno can think about in class anymore.

He wonders what would change, if his teammates knew, and his chest tightens.

Tanner would probably be okay, he reminds himself. And Sid, by virtue of being Sid, and being inherently awkward about most things to begin with. He spares a hasty glance around at everyone else, and tries not to think about the options.

Nealer smacks him with a towel.

"Yo, I’m talking to you."

"Respect your elders,” Geno says, as serenely as he can, and Nealer snorts.

Somewhere in the depths of his bag, Geno’s phone buzzes with a text.

“Right, whatever," Nealer says. "Anyway, since we don’t have a game tonight, I was thinking about plans. How about my ass, your couch. I’m finally beating you at Mario Kart.”

Geno tries to look apologetic. He is apologetic. He’s just also got priorities. "Sorry. I have plan tonight already."

"Yeah? With who?" Neal tugs his sweats on and shoves his feet into the flip flops he insists on wearing, even though it’s barely 30 degrees outside.

“Work.” Geno hates lying. He leans back to double check everything that needs to be washed over break is cleared out of his locker.

“Oh.” He doesn’t have to see Nealer’s expression to hear the disappointment clear in his voice. "Well, I can come hang out, maybe," he says. "You always say you get bored the last couple hours before closing."

“Working prep in back,” Geno says, hurriedly. He’s a terrible friend and an even worse liar, and he prays that Nealer likes him too much to notice. “You know Mama say no more hangout back there.
“Code violation.”


“Tomorrow I work in morning, but free after three,” says Geno. That, at least, is the truth. “You come over then, I bring leftovers?”

“Sure!” Neal agrees brightly. “I’ll be there.”

Geno’s phone buzzes in his bag for a third time, accompanied by a pleasant zing of nerves in his belly.

He calls goodbye to the group of guys headed back up to the dorms, and shoulders his bookbag, heading for the parking lot.

He could tell them, maybe. They might be cool. They might totally get it, but maybe they wouldn’t. Maybe they wouldn’t.

Geno barely even gets it. He wouldn’t be able to blame them.

He tugs his phone out of his bag before dumping it in the trunk, and flips to his texts. They’re all from Patrice.

Just got home. Still on for tonight?

Forgot to ask what time your practice got out.

I keep thinking about you. It’s really distracting.

Geno feels his cheeks flush as he texts back, just got out. on my way. before tossing the phone to the seat next to him and pulling out of the lot.

--

Patrice’s house isn’t hard to find again, even coming from the opposite direction, but Geno still rounds the block twice before parking down at the end of the road by a high fence marked with a “Beware of Dog” sign.

His palms are sweating. He rubs them on the legs of his pants and tries not to look around too much, tries to look inconspicuous.

It’s a nice house, set back slightly from the road, green with white trim, and a broad front porch that creaks pleasantly under Geno’s shoes as he makes his way to the door. Patrice must be watching from the living room, because the door’s opening before Geno even knocks.

"Hey," he says, offering a crooked smile.

Geno’s stomach swoops, fizzing with nerves. "You should let me in," he says. "Neighbors probably don’t like if we give them show."

Patrice’s brows raise high, but he grins back, opening the door wider, and tugging Geno in by the wrist.

They kiss right there against the closed door, one of Patrice’s palms cupping his face.
It's nice. Obviously it's nice. But it's also weird. Different. They're entirely alone for the first time. There are no teammates or parents around. Nobody to catch them. This isn't some party where somebody could walk in at any minute.

“My parents are gonna be out late,” Patrice says, between kisses, like he can read Geno’s mind. His voice is quick, breathless.

Geno thinks, I did that.

He says, “Good,” and kisses Patrice again.

They make out for another minute or two, before Patrice pulls back again.

“You hungry?”

The honest answer is yes, but on Geno’s list of priorities, there are a good deal of other things he’d rather be doing with his mouth. Patrice looks so hopeful, though, that Geno nods.

“Always.”

They have enormous roast beef sandwiches that Patrice assembles after forcing Geno into a seat at the breakfast bar, and eat in relative silence.

“Delicious,” Geno says finally, wiping his mouth. Their elbows keep knocking together as they sit side by side, and he can’t help stealing glances every couple bites. “Thank you.”

Patrice makes a low huh sound, waving it off.

“It’s not like I work in a restaurant or anything,” he says, smiling shyly. “But thanks.”

It’s a little disconcerting, doing the dishes in a strange kitchen. Patrice argues, when Geno starts picking up their plates, but he just says, ”Is rude to leave in sink,” and Patrice finally backs down.

“Fine,” he says, digging a towel out of a drawer. “But I’ll dry.”

He does this thing, just casually in passing, brushing fingers over the small of Geno’s back. A press of his hand, but quicker, like he isn’t really sure what he means to do with it, and before he can decide he’s moved on, toweling off the plates and glasses as Geno hands them over.

It’s nearly nothing, but it’s almost everything Geno’s been craving all week. He doesn’t really know how to describe the feelings warring in his belly. He doesn’t think he’d care, so long as Patrice touched him like that again.

Patrice doesn’t, though. He barely meets Geno’s eyes as they finish tidying up, and he finally hangs the damp towel on a hook by the sink.

He says, ”I have NHL ’13 in my room. You want to play?”


There are posters on the wall for bands that Geno doesn't recognize. The bed is made, but messily, and Patrice plunks down on the edge of the mattress, looking up like he expects Geno to follow.

Geno’s brain explodes a little.

"Come sit," Patrice says, patting the mattress next to him. He smiles, a little nervously. "I mean, if
you want to. There’s also the desk chair.

Geno hurriedly sits, and tries not to count all the points where their bodies are touching. Hips. Knees. Wrists. Maybe if he scooted his foot over a little, he could nudge it against Patrice’s.

"I’m glad you’re here," Patrice says, peeking back at him over his shoulder with another of those shy smiles.

Geno grins. “Me too.”

His nerves finally start to ease as they settle into the game, and it becomes quickly apparent just how woefully out of his league he is.

"You’re terrible," Patrice announces at the end of the period, where the score on screen reads 4-0 in his favor. He tucks his face against Geno’s shoulder, giggling. He's warm and close, and it takes way longer to occur to Geno than it should to slip an arm around Patrice’s shoulders, holding him there. "I mean, like. Really, really bad."

Geno hhmmphs. 

"I skate circles around you on real ice," he retorts. 

"I like to see you try," Patrice says, and then he kisses him. His body eating up the space between them, his hands pressing on Geno’s shoulders, pushing him back against the mattress.

Patrice kisses him, and Geno groans against his mouth because Patrice’s lips are so hungry against his own; so sweet. Patrice kisses him, and Geno kisses back, arms twining around him, holding him close.

They don't have sex. Geno thinks with a thrill that they probably could.

Maybe they should.

They're both hard in their jeans, but Patrice pulls back before Geno can even wrap his brain around the idea.

"I, ah," he says, and then pauses, ducking his head so all Geno can see is eyelashes and the pink flush across his whole face. “Shit, I’m, um. I’m really close. I can just…” he flounders, trailing off and glancing up at Geno through long eyelashes.

Geno must look like an idiot with all the staring he's doing. "You okay?" he asks, tentatively.

Patrice’s face does something complicated, and he says, "I just...I don’t want to rush this, you know? It feels. I mean. It feels good and I don’t want to fuck it up."

Geno’s staring again, he can’t help it.

Finally, he swallows, lifting a hand to brush fingers through Patrice’s bangs, smoothing them back off his forehead just to see if they’re as soft as they look. Just because apparently now, it’s a thing he can do.

"We don’t fuck up,” he says, softly. “But you says stop, we stop.”

Patrice flops off of him onto the bed, burying his face in a pillow with an exasperated groan.

“Arrrgh,” he says, voice muffled. He turns his head, regarding Geno with one dark, appraising eye.
“Okay, I have an idea, but like. Don’t laugh, okay?”

Geno can’t see a single thing funny about this whole situation, but he nods. “Okay.”

“Take your pants off and lie down here,” Patrice instructs, patting the mattress next to him. He unbuttons his own pants, and starts to shimmy out of them. “Just lie down, next to me.”

Geno is naked around a whole dressing room full of people on a regular basis, but he still can’t fight the blush that creeps over him as he stands up to get out of his pants, feeling Patrice’s eyes following his every movement.

They keep their shirts on, but lose the underwear, sharing a pillow and sharing breath, practically nose to nose. If Geno opens his eyes, Patrice is so close it’s nearly out of focus, but his eyes are open, too, and when he catches Geno looking, he tilts his chin up and kisses him. It takes coordination, making out and jerking off at the same time. More than Geno would have thought, not that he’s complaining.

“Fuck,” Patrice breathes, lips still pressed to the corner of Geno’s mouth so the word slurs. “Yes.”

He presses their mouths together again as he comes some minutes later, groaning, high pitched and soft against Geno’s lips.

Geno leans in further, deepening the kiss even as Patrice is breathing hard into his mouth, panting between ragged little moans that Geno swallows up greedily. He’s not quite there yet himself, but Patrice’s tongue in his mouth, the hand he surreptitiously relocates to Geno’s hip -- unobtrusive yet significant enough to set off sparks in his brain -- are enough to tip him over that edge.

He speeds up his hand, breathes, “Fuck, fuck,” and feels Patrice’s lips curl up against his, and then he’s coming. Groaning raggedly, stifling a giggle because shit he really hadn’t meant to sound so...so...

"Wow."

He opens his eyes to find Patrice staring at him, pupils blown and about two inches from his face.

"Hnngh," he groans, trying to hide his face in the shared pillow with an embarrassed little laugh, but Patrice prods him back ’til they’re looking at each other again. Or, Patrice is looking at him while Geno concentrates very hard on Patrice’s right ear.

Patrice smiles. "Hot," he says, and then looks so completely smug that Geno cracks up in spite of himself. Mimicking Geno’s accent, he adds, "And I thought you seemed like such nice boy."


“And uh,” Patrice echoes, giggling. “The messing around?”

“Yeah,” Geno agrees, quietly, and Patrice’s eyes flick up to meet his. "This not messing around anymore, though."

Patrice is quiet for a beat, but then he says, "No, not anymore. Not messing around."

Geno’s not sure who moves first, but they're kissing again, pressed close without regard for the gross space of blanket between their hips. Patrice is grinning, Geno can feel, and he's giggling like an idiot while they trade messy kisses, fingers tangling comfortably in Geno’s hair.
January: Patrice

Chapter Notes

HAPPY MONDAY!!! #funemployment

Geno is really into touching, and it’s kind of the greatest thing.

From the moment Patrice lets him in the front door, he’s got a hand curling around Patrice’s wrist, tugging him close, and fingers pressing cool and gentle to the curve of Patrice’s jaw, tilting his face up for a kiss before they even say hello. Any of the frustration Patrice feels at not having hit his growth spurt yet is instantly dispelled every time he gets to lean up on his toes and feel Geno’s arms wrap sturdy and strong around him like a reflex. Like something out of a movie.

Geno’s fingers lace with his on their way upstairs. Geno’s mouth is warm and heavy on his neck before they get to his bedroom.

Patrice’s brain short-circuits.

And when Geno’s hands aren’t on him, his eyes are; watching Patrice with flushed cheeks and dark eyes as he undoes his fly and shimmies out of his jeans and underwear. Patrice feels it like a physical thing, warm and heavy and bone-deep.

The steadiness of Geno’s hands wavers slightly when Patrice drops to his knees

Patrice says, “Keep touching me. It’s good. I like it.” He feels kind of drunk, and his voice sounds weird and crackly in his own ears.

Geno’s hands find Patrice’s shoulders, and he hangs on.

He’s sunk down on Patrice’s bed in a tangle of unmade sheets and disarrayed pillows and some clean laundry someone set there a day or two ago, but that Patrice has been ignoring in favor of just sleeping around it. He looks ruffled and out of context and Patrice just wants to sit there and stare, except how he wants to touch even more. Wants to be touched. Wants the excuse for Geno’s hands on him any way he can get them.

Geno’s dick is thick and heavy in his mouth, and he sucks in as much as he can on the first go. And it’s funny, how slurs and jokes throw dick-sucking over as some kind of passive, submissive thing, when all Patrice has to do is work his tongue and little and he’s got Geno coming apart for him. His fingers stutter along the ridge of Patrice’s shoulder and up, until his thumb smooths over Patrice’s cheek as Patrice works a rhythm.

Geno takes him deeper, deep as he can, and lets Geno feel the contour of his own dick in his mouth. He breathes hard through his nose and swallows, feeling Geno’s thighs tense under his hands where he’s got them pushed apart.

Geno stutters something in Russian, and then, “Shit,” and then, “Patrice, I’m almost. I’m gonna.”

Patrice pulls off and finishes up with his hand, working quick and tight and ignoring how his wrist cramps at the weird angle. He ducks down and sucks a hickey onto Geno’s inner thigh, just because
it’s there, and he can, and it makes Geno moan in this delightfully satisfying way just before he comes. His fingers curl around Patrice’s so they’re both working his dick, and so the mess gets everywhere, and Patrice thinks wildly that next time, maybe, he wants to finish Geno up with his mouth. Wants to see how far he can take it, and how much dopier Geno’s dopey, fucked-out grin would be.

“You very pretty, Patrice,” Geno says, and Patrice hadn’t even noticed him looking, too turned on and distracted. His fingers stroke through Patrice’s hair.

Patrice eases himself off the floor, knees complaining as he unbends them, and settles cross-ways on the bed next to Geno.

“I mean, uh.” He can’t meet Geno’s eyes when Geno is staring at him like that, all mussed and intense. Dark hair and dark eyes and full, bitten lips. “You, too,” he finishes, lamely.

It’s not true, not really. Geno’s not pretty, in any technical sense, which he seems to acknowledge with a bark of laughter.

“You think?”

He doesn’t. Geno is big, nearly too-big for seventeen, all broad shoulders and long limbs and features he hasn’t quite grown into yet that add up to something just shy of fiercely brutal.

“I think you’re beautiful,” Patrice blurs. And that, at least, is true. There’s nothing fine or delicate about Geno; nothing simple enough for pretty.

Geno blinks, quiet for a long moment before he leans in and catches Patrice’s mouth in a bruising kiss. The kind of kiss Patrice doesn’t even know what to do with, other than collapse into it, let his mind turn to pleasant white noise as Geno’s arms settle back around him. He wants to sink into this moment, be swallowed up by it; just disappear into his own buzzing, giddy need.


The problem is, he wants everything, and that’s not something he really knows how to admit out loud.

“Anything,” he says instead, because somehow that’s easier.

"You want," Geno tries, pulling away to breathe and flicking his tongue over his lips. "Fingers? You want my fingers?"

Patrice thinks he might actually be dying. He can’t imagine how anyone could survive being this turned on.

“Yeah,” he’s breathing, before he even realizes his mouth is open. “Yeah, yeah, here, I have lube.”

He squirms around to reach the drawer next to his bed, yanking it open and rummaging for the bottle that he nearly ends up throwing at Geno in his fumbling haste.

It’s very possible he could have played that a lot cooler.

Geno’s grinning, though, and he looks less teasing more winded as he flips the cap on the bottle. Like they haven’t fooled around before. Like Patrice squirming out of his pants is anything Geno’s never seen.
It’s easy to forget the first couple rough, caustic episodes, with the way Geno’s touching him now. It’s nice, once he remembers to relax. There’s already something familiar in the way Geno’s hand curves around his hip.

“Start with one?” Geno’s biting his lip, looking unsure, and Patrice nods.

“Yeah, uh,” he feels himself start to blush again, “I like two best usually, but just one to start.”

Yeah, right, because he has so much experience. Anyway, he likes the idea of more. Likes the idea of being filled and stretched and aching, and if he even so much as thinks about Geno’s actual dick inside him, doing those things, he’s just going to disintegrate.

Geno works slow and steady, and it’s not a lot but it’s good; tight and wet with lube, and when Patrice lets out a long, slow exhale, breathing, “Okay, another. More,” he gets more.

He moans with it, arching up off the bed a little and curling fingers around Geno’s shoulder to drag him down and kiss him, even at the awkward angle.

Geno’s kisses are hungry, seeming to forget himself. The movement of his fingers gets slow and erratic, and as great as Geno’s teeth against his lower lip feels, Patrice needs more. Hips straining, riding up, fucking himself back on Geno’s hand and clinging to him.

“Up, up,” he hears himself panting, “kind of curl your fingers up a little bit as you- yeah.” Geno seems to wake up, hand starting to move again, and his fingers brush just the right spot and Patrice’s spine feels suddenly like jelly. “Fuck, right there, keep doing that.”

“You like GPS,” Geno observes, but he looks as smug as Patrice has ever seen him. And then he does it again and Patrice can’t think of a snarky comeback, he just digs fingers into Geno’s shoulders and hangs on.

“You need you to-- I need--” Patrice already has a hand fumbling for his own dick, but Geno beats him to it, sitting back a little and curling the fingers of his free hand around him.

His hands are big; rough and calloused same as Patrice’s, from lacing skates and weight training. Patrice gets caught for a second between trying to press back against Geno’s fingers or up into the hand on his dick, and it’s good, it’s so fucking good, he gives a little breathless laugh and then he’s coming.

“Crap, crap,” he gasps, even as Geno’s still jacking him through it slow and steady, letting his fingers slip out. “No warning. Sorry.”

“Is fine,” Geno shrugs. He uses Patrice’s discarded sweats to wipe his hand off and smiles winningly in response to Patrice’s slightly revolted expression. “What, you have better idea?”

Patrice makes a face. “Whatever. I have to do laundry anyway, I guess.”

“Am sorry,” Geno says solemnly, “that orgasm mean so much extra work for you.”

“Ass,” Patrice shoves him in the shoulder and Geno let’s it push him over; just flops over next to him and scootches until they’re almost nose to nose on the pillow.

“You like,” he says confidently. And yeah, that seems like a pretty accurate assessment.

Even though it’s early January, Patrice cracks his bedroom windows to air out the stale boy-smell before they go to shower. Geno’s eyes light up at the mention of it, and his fingers curl around
Patrice’s on the way to the bathroom, like anything else would be too much distance between them right now.

Patrice gets it.

Mostly he’s just relieved every time Geno kisses him, so he can close his eyes and stop feeling so fucking self conscious.

It always takes the water in the second floor bathroom a while to heat up. Patrice mentions it, but Geno waves him off, tugging at his wrist, so that he’ll come closer. He just smooths his thumbs along the seam of Patrice’s lips. He’s staring again, and Patrice can’t stop fidgeting.

"We should get in," he says. "Don't know when my parents will be home."

They just rinse off, it only takes a few minutes, although there’s a short detour when Geno pushes him back against the tile and kisses the air out of him. Patrice is pretty sure he could go again, at least one more time, if his parents weren’t due home in a really, terrifyingly short amount of time.

"Come on," he says, before he can either give in to temptation or panic, and does his best to ignore the slightly hurt look in Geno’s eyes. “Let’s get dressed. I don’t think we have a lot of time."

It’s only a few minutes later when they're dry-ish and dressed-ish, making out on the bed with their shirts off, when he hears a car pulling into the drive.

"Fuck," he says out loud. "Fuck that's my parents."

Geno’s face looks like a caricature of panic, and it would be hilarious except for shit his parents are home, and they both have damp hair, and Patrice is pretty sure he can see a prominent hickey just under the neckline of Geno’s shirt as he’s tugging it on.

“What we telling them?” Geno asks, muffled through t-shirt fabric before he extricates himself, hair skewed in all directions.

Patrice tugs his own shirt over his head and starts trying to smooth Geno’s hair down hurriedly, not meeting his eyes; this is really not the time for getting all distracted staring and touching and. And.

“Uh,” he says brilliantly, but any would-be genius plans get derailed when he hears footsteps on the stairs and his dad’s voice calling his name. “Up here!” he yells, way too loudly.

His dad’s head pops around the doorway a second later, eyebrows going up when he sees Geno. “Hi. Who’s this?”

“Geno Malkin,” Geno says, holding his hand out to introduce himself, but Patrice steamrolls over him.

“He’s, uh. A friend of a friend. I’m tutoring him in English. He’s Russian,” he adds, and tries not to look as panicked as he feels.

“Da,” says Geno, gamely.

His dad stares at them a minute, probably trying to figure out if he’s supposed to remember anything about this.

“Alright, well we’re going out to dinner with your mother in an hour, so wrap it up by then.” He heads back into the hall, pausing only to add, “Teach him to ask how much trouble you had learning
English,” before he disappears again.

“I was three and a half!” Patrice yells after him, but gets no response, so he turns back to Geno. “Um. Sorry about that.”


“Ha ha,” Patrice intones, plunking down next to him but leaving a safe distance of a couple inches between them just in case.

Geno beams. “Yes, I’m hilarious. Now, I think you tell me about how hard time you have learning English.”

“Oh my god shut up, he was exaggerating. And I was really little, so technically it’s probably my parents’ fault for not speaking English at home more.” Patrice elbows him in the side, but this just seems to make Geno laugh harder.

“Uh-huh.” Geno still looks completely entertained, but he leans over and lands a smacking kiss on Patrice’s cheek. “I maybe head out, give you time to get ready for dinner?”

They have an hour. What the hell would he need to do to get ready for burgers with his parents that could possibly take more than fifteen minutes, especially when he’s already showered? But he can hear his dad puttering around up and down the stairs, probably doing something for work in the office down the hall from his room. It’s kind of a huge bonerkill.

Patrice sighs. “You don’t have to go, but we’re probably not gonna get much more privacy.” The door’s only open a crack, and he could probably get away with shutting it, but still. Bonerkill.

“Is fine.” Geno reaches over and pats his hand reassuringly. His eyes are softer now, less teasing. “I see you soon, though?”

“Yeah,” Patrice promises, and there’s a warm little glow in the pit of his stomach as he says it. “Soon.”

He leans in and Geno meets him halfway for the kiss. It’s deep and slow, and Geno’s thumb is still idly tracing down his jawline when they pull apart. And just for a moment it drowns out the anxious, nagging thoughts that sometime soon, Patrice is going to need to explain a few things to a lot of people.

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A couple of days later on Saturday morning, Patrice stalls with the kids for nearly fifteen minutes before finally giving up on waiting for Johnny and starting drills.

“Is Mr. Johnny sick?” Allison Tibbets asks, doing a terrible job trying to sound nonchalant as her gaggle of friends listen interestedly.

“No,” Patrice says, even as he checks his phone for a fifth time. “No, he’s probably just running late. Now please follow directions, I need you to partner up and start passing.”

Allison huffs dramatically, but turns back to her friends as they split off to start drills. Patrice sets his phone to vibrate and slips it into his pocket, trying to will back the anger and frustration rising inside him. Of all the goddamn days to miss, Johnny has to pick the first day back from break, when the
kids are all restless and gamey.

When Johnny finally does arrive, Patrice has a whole lecture all ready to go, but he’s stopped up short at the sight of Johnny’s face. At the pattern of mottled bruising smudged yellowy-purple across his cheekbone, still puffy around his eye.

“Hi,” Johnny says in a rush, beelining for the gym’s foldout bleachers and already tugging off his hoodie. “Hi, shit, I’m so sorry, man. My phone was dead or I would’ve called, I swear.”

“Keep going!” Patrice calls to the kids, many of whom have paused mid-pass to stare at them. Following Johnny, he hisses, “Dude, what happened?”

Johnny grimaces. “My mom’s been acting extra crazy ever since—” he gestures to his eye, huffing. “She keeps trying to stage these really awkward ‘family time’ events, and wouldn’t listen when I said I was running late. My brother had to distract her.”

“Shit,” Patrice breathes, glancing back over his shoulder to make sure the kids are still on task. “But no, I meant what happened? You look like you got hit by a bulldozer. When did that happen?”

“Oh.” Johnny shakes his head once, and then breaks off, and Patrice looks down to see Allison standing a few feet away and watching unabashedly. “Um.”

“Mr. Johnny,” she says, stepping forward before either of them can come up with anything to say, “I have some powder in my backpack, if you want to use it for your face.”

Johnny’s cheeks flush, making the bruise stand out even darker against his tanned skin. “Uh, no,” he says, after an awkward moment. Allison looks at him expectantly, and she moves like she’s going to grab the make up out of her backpack right away. “I’m fine, Allison. You can get back in formation. Don’t worry.”

It takes serious effort for Patrice to keep a straight face as Allison flounces back over to her friends to finish the drill, but the expression of abject misery on Johnny’s face keeps him from cracking up.

“Hey,” he says quietly, “you want to go to the diner or something after this?”

Johnny looks for a moment like he wants to brush Patrice off, but finally he just nods once. “Sure. Yeah, that’d be cool.”

“Cool,” Patrice echoes. “Now come on, let’s organize them into a scrimmage or something. These kids need to burn off some energy this morning.”

Even with the scrimmage, Patrice is more grateful than he’d like to admit when he can finally blow the whistle to signal the end of practice. Johnny looks equally disgruntled, bending to collect cones and deflecting yet another onslaught of questions from Allison.

“I think someone likes you,” Patrice tells him, waggling his eyebrows and smirking while Johnny glares from behind the wheel of his truck, pulling into the diner parking lot fifteen minutes later.

“Ha ha,” Johnny intones, flatly. “Man, remember when they were littler and all we had to worry about was making sure they didn’t fall over as much?”

Patrice just laughs, waiting until they’re seated in their usual booth to ask, “Seriously, what the hell happened? That wasn’t one of my guys, right?”

Johnny shakes his head. “Bryan Bickell.”
“Wait, from your team?” Patrice frowns. “Big guy, right? Plays on your line? What the fuck, man.”

“He’s Pat’s best friend,” Johnny says miserably, looking down at his hands. “Right before break, um. We split up, I guess. So shit got kind of fucked up.”

“No kidding,” Patrice says in a hushed voice. The waitress shows up then, and after ordering, he leans across the table, lowering his voice again. “Hey man, I’m really sorry. You guys always seemed...You seemed good.”

Johnny affords him a wan smile without looking up, picking idly at the fraying edge of his paper napkin. “Sure,” he says quietly. “I guess we were, when we weren’t being too fucking stupid to realize it.”

Something wells up inside Patrice; something that feels irrationally like jealousy. Not at Johnny’s misery, or even for what he’d had with Pat, but for the relative simplicity of it. Johnny and Pat had never hidden what they were.

He doesn’t say any of this, but sits in silence as the waitress comes back with their drinks before speaking up again, “At least now I’m not the only one around here who’s had an eleven-year-old girl offer him makeup lately. We’ve got to stop letting them fuck up our money makers, huh?”

Johnny snorts, but something like a smile plays for a second at the corners of his mouth. “Oh my god, shut up. You’re worse than my brother. But hey, you’ve got all your shit sorted with Malkin, right? Whatever you guys kept fighting about.”

It’s Patrice’s turn to flush hot, fidgeting with his water glass. “I think it’s fine,” he says, careful not to meet Johnny’s eyes.


Patrice stifles a laugh, coughing instead and taking a sip of mineral water for show. “Doesn’t your brother go there?”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Yeah, so? He just plays JV lacrosse. I mostly meant Malkin and Crosby and the rest of that asshole team.”

“Right,” Patrice says, concentrating really hard on sliding his water glass hand to hand across the table in front of him without spilling. “Don’t you guys play them next week?”

“Yes,” says Johnny. “Hopefully they put up more of a fight than you guys did.”


Johnny rolls his eyes but doesn’t bother arguing, and Patrice grins. Back when they’d first begun the soccer camp together, it had been difficult to stay casual about this stuff, but right now Patrice can’t really find it in himself to be bothered.

As if reading his mind, Johnny says, “It was a good game. You guys are fun to play.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” Patrice says, leaning back as the waitress reappears with their sandwiches. “Next time Madison is going down, and we’ll see how much fun you think we are then.”
January: Johnny

Mr Hossa doesn’t ask questions, but he offers to let Johnny go get his eye checked out at the nurse’s office once he’s passed back all their papers. “It’s fine,” Johnny says. “Thanks, but seriously. It’s not a big deal, it looks worse than it is. It’s healing.”

On Wednesday, Dunc and Seabs are in charge of special teams drills at practice. At least after that, Johnny’s too exhausted to care about sharing the powerplay lineup with Pat, or anything, really, beyond some quality time with his water bottle.

“It’s still weird,” he tells Seabrook when they’re done, rinsed off and changed and pushing through the locker room doors into the shockingly bright afternoon sun. “Thinking of you guys as coaches.”

Seabs snorts, digging sunglasses out of the gear bag he’s dragging and shoving them unceremoniously onto his face. It’s all very CSI Miami, and the hair isn’t helping. “Get used to it, bro,” he says, grinning. “We own your asses until graduation. You think Mayers’s bad, wait’ll you see what Duncs wants to do for practice camp this summer.”

“Yeah, I guess you guys must have a lot of time on your hands to plan, between classes at community college,” Johnny fires back, and then doesn’t dodge quickly enough to miss the slap upside the head Seabs gives him. “Ow, sucker.”

“Respect your elders, or whatever,” Seabrook tells him loftily. “And just be glad we stuck around to whip all you little jackasses into shape. Lord knows you’re gonna need it. I’ve seen some of the guys Consol’s starting, and that’s some kind of unfair size advantage bullshit.”

“Size, sure, but we can skate circles around them.”

“Fuck yeah, you can.” Seabs claps him on the shoulder. “No pain no gain, right? Speaking of,” he twiddles his fingers vaguely in the direction of Johnny’s fucked up eye. “What the hell is going on there?”

Johnny sighs, sinking down to sit on the rear bumper of his truck. “Dude, it’s fucked up. I’m dealing with it, though, so like. Don’t worry, okay? I’m not gonna let it affect my game.”

“No,” Seabs agrees. He sinks down next to Johnny, making the truck bounce under them. “Your play looks really good right now. But man, is this-- is this about Kane? I know shit’s messed up between you two.”

“Fuck,” Johnny says, under his breath. He scrubs a hand over his face buying for time, forgetting about the bruise until it twinges sharply. “Man, I was really hoping we could not have this conversation. It’s fine, okay? We split, and it blows, but that shit’s off the ice. We can still be teammates and work together.”

Seabrook nods, but then he’s quiet for a long moment. When he finally looks up, he looks pinched around the eyes; nervous. “Look,” he says, “can I tell you something, like, as the captain, not as Kane’s, um. His ex, I guess. And know that you aren’t gonna lose your shit?”

Johnny wants to throw up, but he nods. “Sure, yeah.”

“I think Coach is going to keep him off top line for a while,” Seabs says, all in a rush. Like somehow that will make it less jarring. “He talked to us about it, after the way Pat’s been playing the last few weeks. Mayers thinks it might do him some good, take some of the pressure off.”
He doesn’t mean to laugh, but that’s what happens. It’s brittle and humorless and a little hysterical, but Johnny can’t help it. Shaking his head, trying to clear it, he says, “You’re fucking kidding, right? Keep him down to take the pressure off?”

He’s angry, suddenly. Not at Seabs, so much, but angry on Pat’s behalf, the familiar possessive surge a heady shock to his whole system.

“Don’t,” he says, turning and staring right into Seabrook’s face. He’s smaller and younger and he knows it, but he can’t help the satisfaction when Seabs still balks under the look. “Don’t say that to him. Keep him down or whatever, you guys are in charge, but don’t fucking patronize him that way, alright? If he’s fucking up, he knows it. Just be straight with him or he’ll make himself crazy trying to figure out what to fix.”

“Yeah,” Seabs says quietly. “Yeah, no, you’re right. I’ll talk to Coach and Duncs and we’ll figure it out. Thanks.”

“Uh-huh,” Johnny says, but it’s all he can manage. He feels like he just got kicked in the chest.

Seabrook slings a long arm around his shoulders, giving him a quick squeeze. “Dude, I’m sorry,” he says, and he sounds so genuinely sad that Johnny can’t force himself to look up, just keeps staring at his hands in his lap. “Anything you need, okay? You’ve got my number.”

Johnny nods once. “Yeah. Okay.”

“And take care of that eye,” Seabs says, getting up. He slings his gear bag back over his shoulder. “Bicks has a mean right hook.”

Johnny stares at him.

“Sorry,” Seabs says, shrugging a little sheepishly. “Just. The way he was glaring at your back in practice today, I guessed. Was I right?”

“Yeah,” Johnny admits. “I didn’t want to get him in trouble.”

Seabrook’s eyebrows go up, but he just shrugs. “Wear that C, buddy. Don’t let it wear you.” He smiles a little, but Johnny only nods, worrying his lip between his teeth. “Alright, catch you later?”

“Sure,” Johnny says. “Yeah. See you tomorrow, Biscuit.”

Seabrook ambles off and Johnny tosses his own bag into the cab, climbing into the driver’s seat and staring at the wheel. He’s wiped, but he has homework in three subjects due tomorrow so he can’t just go home and pass out until dinner.

Fuck it, he thinks finally, and slides back out of the truck, heading for the library at the other end of the back parking lot. He’ll grab a Coke from the machine in the lobby and hopefully by the time he gets home the sugar and caffeine will have perked him up.

It isn’t until he’s digging a couple of wadded up bills out of his pocket that he sees Pat.

He’s on the other side of the glass doors separating the atrium with its soda machine from the actual library, sitting at one of the big study tables half-hidden behind the nearest shelf. There’s a stack of books in front of him and he’s paging through a notebook, leaning over to talk to--

Johnny’s stomach goes cold.
There’s a girl sitting next to him. A pretty girl with red hair, sitting close enough to lean over his shoulder and look at whatever he’s pointing to. He says something and she raises her head, laughing, and Johnny recognizes her.

He only has a moment to notice her face, the way she sobers a little, looking at Pat with a shy, teasing grin, before Pat’s leaning in and kissing her. Johnny sees her eyes go wide a split second before they close and she leans into it, her hand coming up to rest on Pat’s shoulder, only a little hesitant.

He doesn’t remember driving home.

He vaguely registers coming in and dropping the unopened bottle of Coke on the counter and then he’s upstairs behind his shut door, and his bedroom is dim and quiet. It’s easy just to collapse on the mattress and close his eyes for a minute. Just for a minute, and then he’ll get up and he’ll...what? Start his homework, maybe unload the dishwasher. Deal with everything that has to be dealt with.

“Jonathan!”

There are lights, suddenly, and the loud noise of his mother barging into his room and yelling his name. With the clock radio still broken, he’s got no idea how long he was asleep.

“Jon,” his mother says his name again, quieter this time, at least. She leans down with a concerned frown to brush his hair off his face and feel his forehead. “Are you sick? What’s the matter, why are you in bed?”

“No sick,” Johnny grumbles, and tries to roll away from her reaching hands but just ends up with his back to the wall. “Just tired, Mom. I’ll come down later.”

“It is later,” she says, and the abrupt tone is back. “It’s after nine o’clock and your father just got home. Come down for dinner.”

“I’m not hungry.” He just wants to get back to sleep, exhaustion still clinging to him, trying to drag him back down even as his mother looms over him. “Please, Mom. I just want to go to bed, alright?”

His mother sits down on the edge of his bed, and he knows this will never be as easy as he wants.

“Jonathan,” she says, and she’s clearly trying for gentleness, but it only serves to set his teeth on edge. “I know you’re going through a rough time, and you’re dealing with so much, but sweetie, at least now you can just focus on what’s important, focus on--”

“What’s important?” He cuts her off, staring incredulously. He halfway sits to stare into her face. “What is important, huh, Mom? Because Patrick was pretty fucking important to me, but I don’t think you ever really got that, or you wouldn’t spend so much time trying to tell me how wrong I was about him.”

She reels back like he’s slapped her if he usually tries to pull back on the swearing around his family, right now he’s not sure how else to really get her attention.

“I would never say something like that,” she says, but Johnny rolls his eyes.

“Oh, of course not. But you insinuate it every freaking chance you get. How he’s not serious enough, or focused or whatever. How he’s just going to hold me back?” He smiles sarcastically and her frown deepens. “Well, congratulations. We’re over, and I’m pretty sure I was so fucking busy worrying about everything you kept telling me was more important, that he doesn’t even believe I loved him.”
“How dare you,” she says, and her voice is cool as steel. She stands again, and regards him imperiously with hands on her hips. “How dare you imply that this is somehow my fault. Jonathan, you barely speak to me about him. You barely tell me anything anymore, when you go out ‘til all hours and come home with your face like that,” she gestures to the bruise on his face, which throbs unhelpfully. “I take responsibility for a great many things in your life, but the decisions you make about who to date have always been your own.”

He lets out a derisive snort. He can’t help it. He’s so angry all the time now, like a constant furnace roaring inside him that consumes anything and everything, raging out of control.

“Yeah,” he says, pushing off the bed in one fluid movement and shoving past her to collect his phone and truck keys from the dresser. “Yeah, Mom. You keep telling yourself that.”

“Jonathan!” She snaps, “Don’t you turn your back to me, young man. You don’t talk to me this way.” She reaches out to grab his arm but he shakes her off.

“I just did,” he says, still not looking at her as he grabs a hoodie off the floor, tugging it on. “And I’m not turning my back, I’m leaving. Get out of my way.”

It’s not until he says the words out loud that he’s sure of what he’s doing, key ring looped around his finger, and in that moment he’s pretty sure he’s as surprised as she is.

She’s so shocked, she does what he says. Or rather, she doesn’t try to stop him as he brushes past her and out the door, down the stairs. He can hear the television blaring with the news from the den, where his dad is watching.

He doesn’t bother to stop and say anything, just slams the door behind him and has the truck’s engine started before he’s even fully seated behind the wheel. The front door opens as he’s pulling out, and he sees his mother in the rearview mirror calling after him, his father coming to stand confusedly behind her. Then he rounds a bend, and they’re out of sight.

It’s only now that he realizes he has no idea where he’s going. Any other time he’s been upset with his family, he’s just gone to Pat’s.

He pulls over to a curb and lets the engine idle until his breathing slows, knuckles still white on the steering wheel. His phone is in the cup holder where he dropped it, and he reaches down, turning it over in his hand. After only a moment’s hesitation, Johnny unlocks the screen and sends Seabrook a text.

*Hey, you busy? Can I come over?*

Seabs doesn’t ask a lot of questions. He hands Johnny a soda and leads him into the living room, where Duncs is collapsed on the saggy couch in front of the TV showing *Alien*.

“My face had better not get posted up as a suspect in some Amber Alert bulletin,” Duncs says, without turning away from the screen.

Johnny snorts, collapsing on the couch next to Duncs and popping the tab on his soda. He says, “I kidnapped my damn self.”

“Oh good,” says Seabrook. He pats Johnny's shoulder proudly as a facehugger lays eggs down a guy’s throat on screen. “Ugh, Duncs, that looks like you with Mara.”

He does something gross with his tongue that earns him a pillow to the face from Keith. Johnny toasts him.
January: Geno

“Geno’s got a girlfriend,” Denis singsongs in Russian over dinner. Geno kicks him under the table. “Ouch! Mom, Geno’s got a girlfriend and he’s kicking me.”

“Don’t kick your brother,” their mother says, but Geno knows the telltale crinkles around her eyes when she’s trying not to laugh. “And what does he mean? You haven’t got a girlfriend, have you?”

“I don’t,” Geno says, truthfully, even as Denis is already bulldozing over him.

“He does! This is like the fifth Saturday he’s bribed me to switch shifts so he has the afternoon free.”

Geno glares at him, but Denis just returns to his potatoes, looking innocent as can be.

Their father frowns. “Evgeni, it’s not like you to shirk responsibilities like that. I certainly hope your brother is wrong, and you aren’t putting some girl before your more important obligations.”

*Be more of a stereotype, Dad,* Geno doesn’t say. He takes a long drink of water instead, and tries to look very focused on his food.

“Denis is just being stupid,” he says, when he’s pretty sure his parents’ eyes are about to start boring holes into him. “I don’t have a girlfriend, and I’m not shirking anything. We switched shifts, that’s all. I’m still going to work, I just needed Saturday afternoon.”

“Again,” says Denis, unhelpfully.

“Why do we even keep you?” Geno asks him, and Denis smiles sweetly around an enormous mouthful of food.

“Boys,” says their mom, and Geno rolls his eyes, but backs down.

“Geno hasn’t got time for girls,” their father says, smiling indulgently at him over his wine glass. “He’s too busy winning games.”

Geno smiles weakly under their mom’s proud agreements and Denis’s theatrical gagging noises, and tries his best to ignore the sick weight in his gut. The dinner he’d helped their mom prepare suddenly doesn’t look so appetizing anymore. He is going to kill Denis later.

Not that Denis has any idea. Not that he thinks he’s doing anything besides giving Geno shit so they don’t have to listen to their dad wax poetic about Putin over family dinner again. But nope, Geno hasn’t got a girlfriend, and wouldn’t their parents just love what he *does* have. He’s pretty sure he’d be on the next flight back to Moscow before he could even call Patrice and explain.

Patrice.

The idea of him seems alien in this house. So do the things that Geno feels, thinking about him. The soda pop fizz in his chest, and the way he still gets kind of jangly with nerves every time they talk. That nervous-excited feeling you get when there’s a pop quiz in your best subject.

Only, now it makes his stomach seize. It makes him a liar in his own home, and he can’t remember the last time he wanted something enough to betray his own family like this. If he’s ever wanted something this much.

So he shuts up. He eats his dinner. He ignores the prickle of guilt still needling at him, and when he’s
done, he asks to be excused to go finish his homework.

“Of course,” says their mother.

“Come join me to watch the game later, when you’re finished,” says their father.

“Have fun talking to your secret girlfriend,” sings Denis.

Geno is seriously going to throttle him in his sleep.

Upstairs, he checks his phone. Patrice has sent him a YouTube video montage of dancing goalies, and, *Do you wanna hang out on Thursday after practice?*

Soda pop fizz.

Geno watches the video, grinning. *Flower can do cartwheel on the ice,* he types back. And then, *Maybe movies?*

He’s not even sure what’s out. He doesn’t care. He just wants the excuse to sit in the dark and hold Patrice’s hand somewhere that’s neutral territory. Away from families, away from real life.

*Sure! Meet me at the multiplex by my school at noon?* Patrice includes a link to the movie listings and adds, *Cartwheel?? Tuukks just throws stuff sometimes, and Khu sings to himself during games.*

*Goalies not like other people,* Geno sends back and, feeling better than he has all evening, settles at his desk to start his homework.

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They end up at the second *Hobbit* movie, because neither of them feel like waiting two and a half hours for the next showing of *Jack Reacher*.

Geno has no idea what’s going on, he never saw the first installment, but it’s not the worst thing ever. There’s a lot of battle scenes and ugly guys riding wolves, and that’s pretty cool. Also, there’s the way Patrice’s fingers twine with his before the trailers are even over, and how the armrest between them never got pulled down, so Patrice just oozes into his side and settles there comfortably, his head resting on Geno’s shoulder.

About an hour in, his mouth finds Geno’s neck, and Geno is suddenly really glad they’re in the very back of a mostly-deserted theater. He angles his chin down, and Patrice tilts up to kiss him, and Geno doesn’t remember a single thing about the movie after that.

“Wanna come over?” Patrice asks, as soon as the first ending credits hit the screen. “My parents are out until late tonight.”

Geno nods. *Soda pop fizz.*

He follows Patrice in his own car through the now-familiar residential enclave, parking a little ways down the block as usual, out of sheer force of habit.

“You can park on our curb, you know,” Patrice tells him, amused. He’s fishing for his house keys, and all Geno wants to do is leave an enormous hickey on that pale stretch of skin above Patrice’s coat collar. Something vivid and lasting and flagrantly possessive. “Even if my parents come home early, we can just tell them I was tutoring you again.”

He giggles when Geno pushes him through the front door, the second he’s got it open.
“Your parents think you such good boy.” Geno shucks his coat and shoes, trying to make them seem as unobtrusive as possible among the preexisting jumble of winterwear in the entryway.

Patrice swats him. “I am good. Anyway, are you complaining?”

“I,” says Geno, trying to remember what they’re talking about. It’s really hard to focus when Patrice’s hands are sliding into the back pockets of his jeans like that. “Nope.”

“Good.” Patrice tugs him in and they’re so close that Geno can feel Patrice’s dick getting hard where it’s pressed up against his leg. “Because I was gonna offer to make cocoa or something, and be a good host, but now I mostly just want your fingers back inside me.”

Geno’s brain shorts out entirely.

“That was good last time?” he asks, stupidly.

Something in the teasing quirk of Patrice’s smile flickers. “I mean, yeah. For me, it was. But if you aren’t into it, we don’t have to—”

“No, no,” Geno says. “Was good. Was really good.” He can feel himself blushing like crazy, but can’t bring himself to care. “I think about it all week.”

Patrice smiles, bright and broad and overwhelming. “Me too,” he says.

Geno follows him up the carpeted stairs to his room and shuts the door behind them. Something about the quiet expanse of the empty, unfamiliar house makes his skin prickle; self conscious in a way set apart from the mundane worry of returning parents or nosy neighbors. Patrice’s small, bright bedroom is a satellite, warmly familiar, safely outside the gravitational pull of guilt and family and obligation.

He doesn’t think he’ll ever get over watching Patrice undress. Watching Patrice do anything, really. He carries himself with the same quiet confidence in here as on the ice, which is to say, right up until he realizes Geno’s watching him and goes all to pieces in a collapse of flushed cheeks and awkward laughter as he gets the fly of his jeans caught on his boxers.

“Why do you always do that?” he asks. “Stare like that. It’s weird.”

“I stare because you fun to stare at,” Geno says, and enjoys the way Patrice goes pink right up to the tips of his ears. Being naked is great; he’s never had a problem with it in any capacity, but sexy-naked is so much more fun than dressing room-naked, especially when it involves the option of knocking Patrice onto the bed and groping his ass.

Especially when it involves Patrice moaning happily and tangling their legs together, until all Geno can concentrate on is not coming all over them both every time he gets some friction on his dick.

He mumbles, “You still want fingers?” between sloppy, desperate kisses, and Patrice nods vehemently, nearly headbutting him in the nose.

“Yeah, yes. Lube’s in the drawer behind you.”

Geno untangles enough to dig it out, enjoying the way Patrice’s eyes go all glazed watching him slick a couple fingers up, and how his legs fall open reflexively for Geno’s hand. His hips stutter, shifting, and his breath quickens against Geno’s cheek.

He says, “Start with two, okay?” and then when Geno hesitates, “Come on, you’re not gonna break
me. I’ll tell you if it’s not good.”


He’s never going to get used to this. Never going to get used to how tight and hot Patrice feels around his fingers, and how Patrice starts getting all shaky and clingy pretty much the second Geno starts tracing his rim with one slicked up fingertip.

He presses in with two and Patrice groans, tensing and then relaxing by increments as he starts to ride into it a little.

Patrice says, “Remember last week, when you did that thing with your--” Geno crooks his fingers on the outward stroke and Patrice actually yelps. “Yeah, that,” he says, breathlessly. “Keep doing that.”

Geno laughs, and does it again. He can get lost in this, in the deep, slick thrust, and shifting his fingers apart a little, adding a bit more stretch and making Patrice squirm around it. He likes how he can actually feel the right spot inside Patrice that, if he strokes it just right, teases and rubs and presses against it, will leave Patrice shaking and sweating and desperate where Geno’s got him pinned against the mattress.

Incidentally, it turns out that Patrice is a lot easier to pin down when Geno’s playing with his ass and nobody’s trying to throw a punch.

He goes all boneless and shaky, it’s almost too easy, and fuck, what Geno wouldn’t give to just slip those fingers out and replace them with his dick. It’s dark and heavy and leaking where he’s got it tucked up against Patrice’s hip, allowing himself a little grind every once in awhile but mostly just staying very, very still and praying to every saint he can name that he doesn’t shoot off before it’s his turn.

Patrice says, “Shit, you’re hard,” like he can read Geno’s mind. Or maybe just see his face, where they’re nearly nose to nose and Geno’s biting his lip in concentration, his breath almost as ragged as Patrice’s.

Geno nods, and Patrice laughs, breathless and short and a little hysterical. He says, “You wanna come on my stomach?”

Geno is pretty sure this is what losing his mind feels like.

He says, “Yeah, okay.” And then, “Um.” And finally, “Uh, how should I..?”

Patrice mouth scrunches up in a frown, but then falls open in a stuttering sigh as Geno strokes over his prostate again.

“Okay, it’s cool if you wanna finish fingering me, first,” he says, with another slightly hysterical hiccup of laughter. “I just, um. I’m gonna…”

He trails off, implications clear as he fumbles for his dick where it’s curved against his belly, bobbing with every little roll and shift of his hips.

Geno never thought he’d see a dick as pretty, but somehow, it applies. He never thought he’d think of another guy as pretty, but looking at Patrice all spread out and riding his hand like this, flushed and breathing in gasps and sighs and fuck, fuck, fuck’s, it’s all he can come up with.

He likes watching the way Patrice’s fingers curl around his own dick, and the short, fast strokes he uses. He tries to time the thrusts of his fingers with them, but that just makes Patrice’s hand fumble
and his hips twitch, and then he’s coming, rocking back onto Geno’s fingers and spilling into his own hand.

“Fuck,” he says again, breathlessly, grinning. “Fuck.”

Geno leans in and kisses his laughing mouth, rewarded with sloppy, lazy kisses and a hand firm on his ass.

“C’mon,” Patrice tells him. “Go for it. I’m a mess already.”

He looks completely fucked out, flushed and sweaty, with a smear of come on his hip, and if Geno even tries to think, he’s going to lose it.

He slides his fingers free, and Patrice yelps.

“Sorry,” he says, quickly. “Sorry, sorry. You okay?”

“Yeah,” Patrice says. He makes another of his scrunchy faces as he re-settles on the blanket. “Just felt kind of weird.”

Geno can’t think of a response for this, so he just kisses Patrice again and shifts up to straddle him. Patrice’s other distinctly sticky hand finds his ass and pulls him in close, and Geno uses the excuse to grind off shamelessly against Patrice’s hip as they make out.

He comes way quicker than he means to, before he can salvage any kind of dignity.

Patrice’s fingers stroke through Geno’s hair as he buries his face in Patrice’s neck, keeping him close, and it’s nice. Listening to his heart hammer in his ears, and basking in the warm, comfortable tangle of their bodies.

After a moment or two, Patrice says, “You’re lying in your own jizz, dude.”

Geno makes an inarticulate noise, still face-down against Patrice’s shoulder, but can’t summon the motivation to move. “Worse things happen,” he mumbles, and Patrice laughs.

“Yeah, but also I kind of can’t breathe.”

With a groan, Geno rolls off of him. The sheets are nice and cool under his back, after the tight press of their sweaty bodies, and he hums happily.

“That was very good,” he says, and next to him Patrice makes a low noise of agreement.

“That thing you do with your fingers is never gonna get old.”

Geno opens his eyes to find Patrice smirking at him from about three inches away. He grins back.

“Maybe someday soon I try with more than just fingers?”

Patrice’s eyes go wide, but he nods. He looks momentarily lost for words.

Finally, he says, “That would be. Uh. I’d like that.”

Geno kisses him again. It seems appropriate. He asks, “Have you done before?”

Patrice’s cheeks go scarlet, but he nods. “Yeah, um. My ex and I did it a couple times.”
Patrice has an ex. Geno isn’t sure what’s more surprising, the idea itself, or how something about the idea of another guy touching Patrice like this makes Geno kind of nuts.

He swallows and says, “Oh.”

Patrice is looking at him, expression inscrutable. He asks, “What about you?”

“I have sex before, with girlfriends,” Geno says. It’s funny how he has to actually think about it, think back, even though the last one was only a few months ago, and had felt so significant at the time. All those afternoons sneaking around with her suddenly feel like something he read a long time ago, about someone else’s life. “But we never, I mean. We never do like this.”

Patrice blinks. “You’ve had girlfriends?”

“Yes, I have plenty before. You never have girlfriend?” Geno feels just as surprised as Patrice sounds.

“Dude, no.” Patrice is still looking at him like Geno just sprouted a second head, or something. “I’m gay. That’s not really my thing.”


But Patrice is still giving him that look, still frowning and tense. “I thought, uh. I mean,” he says slowly, “you’ve been with guys before, too, right?”

Geno shakes his head. “No. You the first.”

As soon as he says it, he wishes he’d had it in him to lie.

“It matter?” he asks, and Patrice shakes his head.

“No,” he says quietly, but he can’t seem to meet Geno’s eyes.

“Different with you,” Geno says. All he wants is to go back to how they’d been about thirty seconds ago. All happy and fucked out, and Patrice with that stupid, perfect grin. “Never even notice boy like that, before you. You different, you make me feel different.”

He knows even before he shuts his stupid mouth that he’s only dug himself in deeper. Patrice’s eyes are shuttered, and he’s drawn back into himself a little, wearing an expression Geno hasn’t seen in weeks and definitely didn’t miss.

“Okay,” he says, dark eyes meeting Geno’s for a moment before darting away again. “I mean, thanks.”

Geno is lost. He hadn’t been trying to compliment Patrice. He’s not sure what he’d been trying to accomplish, but it certainly wasn’t this. This lost, hollow, bottoming-out feeling in his chest, nerves and frustration tripping over each other as more articulate English escapes him.

“What’s matter?” he asks stupidly. The anger is there, he can feel it just under the surface waiting for an excuse, a lapse in judgment that Geno wants to avoid at all costs. The same anger he feels every time everyone gets the punchline but him, floundering behind in a quagmire of foreign colloquialisms and unfamiliar context.

“Nothing,” says Patrice, and he sounds...not exasperated, necessarily, but almost angry, as frustrated as Geno feels. Nothing makes sense.
“Why it change anything, who we like before,” Geno presses. “Why back then matter, if this is good, now?”

Patrice actually rolls his eyes. “It doesn’t,” he snaps. Liar. “It’s fine. Just. My parents are going to be home soon, you should probably get going.”

Geno stares at him in disbelief. Patrice won’t look back.

“...Fine,” Geno says, at last. He gets up and rolls off the bed, kicking through the piles of discarded clothing to find his own. “Fine. You be weird, and I go.”

“I am not being weird!” Patrice explodes, from the other side of the bed where he’s tugging on a pair of sweats. There’s still dried spunk spattered all across his belly.

Geno glares. “You weird and you full of shit,” he snarls, grabbing his jacket and stalking for the door.

Patrice follows him down the hall and down the stairs to the entryway, and stands silently with arms crossed tightly over his chest while Geno shoves feet into his shoes, not even bothering to lace them. There’s a weird second of hesitation from both of them as Geno moves to let himself out, hanging heavy in the air between them, pulling the tension taut until Geno thinks he hears an audible snap.

He spares Patrice one last glance before shaking his head and letting himself out, and if Patrice watches him go, he doesn’t know, because he never lets himself turn around.
January: Patrice

Patrice’s phone alarm blares, but it’s half a minute before he can open his eyes and wake up enough to remember how to turn the thing off. Once he does, he falls back onto the pillow in the blessed silence, and falls back asleep.

“Patrice!”

He gets dragged back to consciousness by the sound of his name, and someone unceremoniously yanking back the covers and jostling his shoulder.

“Patrice, you’re going to be late.”

It’s the note of concern in his father’s voice that finally drives him to open his eyes, swatting his hand away as he reaches down to shake Patrice again.

“Ugh,” he groans. “Okay, okay, I’m awake.”

“And we’re all very proud. There’s coffee in it for you if you can make it downstairs.” His dad pats him on the head, ruffling his hair into an even crazier state of bedhead, and putters off down the hall, humming.

Patrice makes an inarticulate noise of gratitude at his dad’s retreating back, and flops over again on his blankets. His phone shows three texts from Geno, but he ignores them, stuffing it into the pocket of his gym bag on his way downstairs.

A muffin and a travel mug of coffee are waiting for him on the counter. He sends a hasty text to Johnny that he might be a couple minutes behind, and to just get started without him, and grabs his keys as the sounds of the snowblower coughing to life emanate from the back yard.

When he gets there, Johnny has the kids organized into groups and doing stretches on the gymnasium floor.

“Man,” he says, taking one look at Patrice and pulling a face, “you look like roadkill.”

“Shut up. I slept through my alarm,” Patrice says, narrowing his eyes as he loops his whistle around his wrist. “That black eye really suits you.”


“Touchy, touchy,” says Patrice. “How was your week? Dealing with your coach and everything, I mean.”

“Eh.” Johnny shrugs, eyes drifting back over the kids.

“Rough one?” Patrice asks, tentatively. Johnny just shrugs again.

“I’ve had better.”

Patrice nods in commiseration, not knowing what else to say, so the silence just stretches on between them, the kids’ chatter filling in the gap.

“Hey, I can lead drills today,” Patrice says, finally. “If you need a break, or whatever.”
“Nah,” Johnny says, waving him off. “I’m fine.”

“Right,” says Patrice, but too low for Johnny to hear over the noise in the gym.

Patrice doesn’t want to admit it, even to himself, but he’s never been more okay with handling a gymnasium full of hyperactive little kids. Between organizing them all into groups, demonstrating drills, and keeping everyone focused, he doesn’t have a moment to spare thinking about the unread text messages on his phone.

“Diner?” he asks Johnny when it’s over, and they’re shepherding the last of the kids back out into the atrium.

“Sure,” says Johnny. “Grab the soccer balls, I’ll get the cones. I’m starving.”

Patrice grabs the mesh bag and starts chasing down wayward soccer balls strewn around the gym. It’s a moment before he looks up and notices the woman standing just inside the big double doors, watching them.

Johnny seems to notice the same moment Patrice does, nearly dropping the armload of cones he’s holding and muttering, “Fuck.”

“Dude,” says Patrice, “what is your mom doing here?”

“Fuck,” Johnny says again. “Um. I’ve been ignoring her calls and texts all week. I should’ve figured she’d show up here.”

“Ignoring...huh?” Patrice doesn’t have a chance to ask more, Johnny’s mom already making her way over to them. Her mouth does the same thing as her son’s, turning down at the corners in a taut little frown, and next to him he can feel Johnny go rigid. “Um, I’ll give you a minute,” Patrice says hurriedly, taking the cones from Johnny’s arms and beelining for the bleachers.

Patrice means to give them some privacy, he really does, but it’s hard not to hear the catch in Johnny’s mother’s voice when she says his name.

“Jonathan.”

“Hi, Mom.” Patrice can hear the frown in Johnny’s voice. “What are you doing here?”

“I couldn’t get in touch with you, what was I supposed to do?” she snaps, although her tone is more wounded than angry. “You need to come home, Jon. We need to talk about this with your father and figure out--”

“I’m done talking to you!” Johnny’s voice explodes, amplified and ricocheting from the polished wood floors to the exposed metal rafters. “I thought that was obvious when I left, but you won’t take a fucking hint. I need some space, Mom. You have to leave me alone.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” she snaps, as Patrice does his best to look preoccupied with triple-checking the sign-in sheet. He couldn’t ignore their voices if he tried, and part of him wonders if he shouldn’t just grab his gear and go. “You’re my son and you’re underage, what would people say if they thought I just let you disappear whenever you felt like it? How would that look?”

“Right.” Patrice has never heard Johnny sound so snide, so much like an angry kid. “Because that’s all that matters to you, isn’t it? What people think. What will they think about you letting me go to a state school, or date a guy like Pat, or, god forfuckingbid, I go spend a few nights with my friends. Glad you can at least keep your priorities consistent, Mom. Thanks.”
“That is not what I meant and you know it,” she says, clearly trying not to shout, for all the good it does. “I’m worried about you, Jon. Your father and I both are. We don’t like not knowing where you are, or whether or not you’re okay, and we can’t resolve anything if you aren’t around for us to talk to.”

“Well, now you know where I am,” Johnny says caustically, and Patrice chances a glance up at them in time to see him flinch back out of range when she reaches out to touch his arm. “Happy? Now leave me alone, I’ll come home when I’m ready.”

“I am not happy,” she says, although her voice is quieter now. “But I am glad to see you and know you’re alright. Have you been staying with Patrice?”

Patrice looks up in spite of himself, wishing there was some way he could look less conspicuous, sitting alone with his clipboard under the bright overhead fluorescents.

“I’ve been at Dunc and Seabs’ place,” Johnny tells her, with a vindictive edge to his voice, and sure enough Patrice can see his mother’s cheeks go pale from a dozen yards away.

He knows it’s coming even before she turns to him and asks, “Could Johnny stay with you, Patrice? Would your parents mind? I can call them, later.”

“There’s no need,” Patrice says hurriedly, at a panicked look from Johnny behind his mother’s back. “Um, yeah, sure, if he wants to, he can crash with me.”

Johnny looks both relieved and annoyed, but he gives Patrice a stiff nod of thanks before his mother rounds on him again. “At least this way I know you’ll be safe,” she says, and he glowers, but doesn’t argue. “Maybe you’ll even answer my calls again, someday soon.”

He snorts derisively, but she glares right back. “I said before, Mom. I just need some space.”

“Well, don’t test your luck,” she says brusquely, clearly making an effort to compose herself, smoothing her hair back and resettling the strap of her purse across her shoulder. “You’re still seventeen, and it’s my right to know where you are and what you’re doing. And I love you,” she adds. She turns to Patrice, who smiles nervously around his clipboard, and says, “Look after him for me?”

“Uh,” says Patrice, looking anywhere but at Johnny. “Yeah, Mrs. T. He’ll be fine.”

“Thank you,” she says. “And tell your parents I said so, as well. They can call me any time.” She turns and gives Johnny one last, hard look, making him shift and look away.

“Goodbye, Mom,” he says finally, pointedly, and at last, after opening her mouth and closing it again wordlessly, she turns and heads for the door, the clicking of her heels echoing even after she’s out of sight.

“So.” Johnny says after a long minute, during which Patrice shifts uncomfortably, pencil still in hand.

“So,” echoes Patrice. “Uh. You never mentioned that you ran away from home.”

“Because I didn’t,” Johnny says, exasperatedly. “She’s totally overreacting, I just went to crash at Dunc and Seabs’ for a few days to clear my head after we had a fight.”

“Without telling her where you were going.”

“Are you trying to be helpful?” Johnny asks, bristling as he stomps over to join Patrice on the bench.
His fists are balled at his sides, and it’s all Patrice can do not to scoot away down the bleachers. “Because you’re not.”

“No, I mean,” Patrice says, floundering. He puts the pencil and clipboard aside, trying to look supportive and not at all like he just witnessed something that was none of his business and way over his head. “I guess I’m just surprised, sorry.”

“Whatever,” Johnny grumbles, drawing in on himself and glancing away. “You sure you’re cool with me crashing over for a few nights? I can just go back to Dunc and Seabs’ place, she doesn’t have to know.”

“No, it’s fine.” Patrice is surprised at the vehemence in his own voice, and he leans over to nudge Johnny’s arm with his elbow. “Hey, man, it’s cool. Really. We’ll be able to feed you better, anyway.”

“That wouldn’t be difficult,” Johnny snorts, but the corner of his mouth turns up in the barest hint of a smile, and Patrice grins back.

“Let’s go grab lunch, and then you can go collect your stuff and bring it back to my place.”

He gathers up the clipboard again and slings one of their gear bags over his shoulder, leaving the other for Johnny and leading the way outdoors into the frigid afternoon air.
Johnny wakes up on Monday morning to a pillow being dropped onto his face, and the sound of an unfamiliar alarm blaring.

“Get up,” says Patrice’s muffled voice from somewhere above him.

“You first,” Johnny grumbles, scooting further down into the borrowed sleeping bag where he’s camped out on Patrice’s bedroom floor.

Patrice groans, and Johnny can hear blankets rustling.

“No, come on.” Johnny opens an eye to see Patrice looking blearily down at him. “We’re already running late and you have to leave with me so I can lock the front door. There isn’t an extra key I can give you, dude. Move your ass.”

“Ugh,” says Johnny, but he follows suit when Patrice finally rolls out of bed, sitting up and rummaging through his bag for a clean shirt.

There’s coffee in a travel mug waiting for him when Johnny finally follows him downstairs, dressed and with his bag slung over one shoulder, truck keys in hand.

“Text me if you need anything,” Patrice says, and Johnny nods.

“Yeah.”

“And text me when you’re done with stuff this afternoon. I might have tutoring but it’s kind of up in the air, so worst comes to worst you can just drive over and get the keys from me or something.” Patrice locks the door behind them, jingling the house keys on their ring to punctuate the statement.

“Yeah,” says Johnny again. “Yeah, sure. Thanks. I’ll uh, see you tonight, I guess.”

“Yup,” Patrice agrees.

And then it’s just Johnny in his truck with his coffee and a bag full of homework assignments he hasn’t even thought about, wishing for the life of him that he were the kind of guy who could justify skipping school.

Things don’t improve much from there.

He goes to class, takes some incompletes on his homework, and tries to pay attention. He takes his lunch outside and eats in his truck, picking listlessly at the chicken salad and listening for the next bell.

On the way back to class he sees Pat, holding hands with the girl from the lake party. He thinks about the gift card to Total Hockey he’d bought weeks ago for Pat for Christmas, tossed into the drawer of his nightstand and conveniently forgotten until just now.

The realization sweeps over him, and he ducks into the nearest bathroom, taking shallow breaths and slamming his fist into a flimsy stall door. The door sags back crookedly on its hinges and Johnny’s knuckles throb dully.
He catches his reflection in the grimy mirror over the sink as he leaves, pale and pinched with blank eyes in a bruised face.

If anybody else notices, they don’t say anything. Practice is just practice -- and an exercise in looking anywhere but at Pat -- and the guys still seem to see him, to talk to him like he’s a person. Like he’s their captain.

Which he is.

It’s something he can pull on with the uniform, that fits like it was made for him; something that he knows and trusts without having to think. And just like that he’s breathing again, he’s skating and he’s running through drills and all he has to think about and focus on is the stick in his hands, and the puck, and making Crow’s life in the net as complicated as possible.

Of course, it sours as soon as he gets back to the changing room. Pat’s there, bullshitting with Bicks and taking slaps on the back and nice works from the guys, even though he’s quieter than usual and taking up less of everyone’s space with his dumb jokes and crude commentary.

Johnny thinks, Good, stuffing gear back into his bag with a lot more force than necessary, and pretends not to notice the hopeful look Pat casts him as he stalks out of the room for the back lot.

He’s sitting in the cab of his truck when Patrice gets home, some CD Carbomb gave him turned down low as he watches his breath fog in the chilly air.

“What are you doing?” Patrice asks, tapping on the truck window until Johnny opens the door and slides out. “Dude, how long have you been waiting here?”


“An hour,” Patrice echoes, staring levelly at him. “Are you trying to freeze? C’mon, dumbass, let’s go inside. My parents’ll be home soon and we can start dinner.”

Johnny follows him in and gets some water boiling before settling down at the counter with his history book. He’s barely spoken all day and is overwhelmingly grateful when Patrice doesn’t seem to want to challenge that, just puttering around the kitchen making salad and dubiously sniffing a collection of half-used jars of pasta sauce.

“Hey,” Patrice says finally, cutting over the comfortable background noises of boiling water and bubbling sauce, “was your hand bruised like that this morning?”


It would be so easy to say it happened at practice. It would make everything so much simpler.

“I hit a door.” He hears himself say it like reciting a script, inflectionless but unwavering. “In the bathroom at school.”

If Patrice is surprised, he doesn’t show it. He just goes to the freezer and digs around, throwing a bag of frozen peas at Johnny before returning to the cucumber he’d been peeling.

“Not that I’ve got much room to talk,” he says, not bothering to look up, “but you might want to find some, like, healthier outlets for that aggression? I mean, I hear that’s why some people take up sports where you hit stuff with big sticks.”
When Johnny glances up he can see Patrice’s lips twitching at the corners.

“You’re hilarious,” he says, and Patrice just smiles a little more. “It was dumb, I know.”

“You can’t just keep flipping out,” Patrice says, and even while the honesty smarts a little, it’s better than pity.

Johnny says, “Yeah,” but can’t think of anything else to add, so he just adjusts the peas on his hand and goes back to answering questions about the Supreme Court.

His mom texts him three times before he goes to bed, finally asking Please just tell me you’re alright?

I’m fine, he texts back, and then shuts off his phone. He punches his pillow into submission before scrunching down in the sleeping bag, trying to will himself unconscious.

“You’re breathing really loud,” Patrice says, after a few minutes of lying in the dark. “What the hell, man?”

Johnny shifts around, trying to get comfortable. He chews on his lower lip. He says, “Pat cheated on me.”

Somewhere in the dark above him, Patrice draws a sharp breath. “Shit, for real?”

“I mean,” Johnny starts, and then hesitates. “I just saw him kiss her, at that party by the lake awhile back. I didn’t ask if that’s all they did. But I guess they’re a thing now.”

“Her?” says Patrice. There’s a shifting of bedclothes and the silhouette of his face appears over the edge of the mattress, eyes glinting in the dark. “That’s fucked up.”

“He was always telling me he’s not gay,” Johnny imitates Pat’s defensive whine. “I should’ve listened, apparently.”

Patrice gives an indignant little snarl. “Are you kidding me? That kid’s been stupid for you since day one. Operative word being stupid,” he adds, with a humorless snort. “Ugh, and then he got together with her, already? Tacky.”

“I guess,” Johnny says quietly. “I saw them kiss in the library, and they were holding hands today.”

“Gross,” says Patrice.

Johnny doesn’t say anything else; just lies there running fingers back and forth over the bruised knuckles of his other hand. Finally, Patrice says, “Man, I always kinda thought you guys were endgame.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says. “Me too. Is that dumb?”

Patrice hums softly. “Nah,” he says, after a moment’s consideration. “On other people, maybe. But you guys were this big deal, like, I remember when you got together. I didn’t even really know you, but all these guys were talking about how brave you were, and crap like that. I guess I was just pissed, though, that you had the balls to be so open about it, when I didn’t.”

Johnny frowns up into the dark, heartbreak and frustration momentarily pushed aside. “Wait, seriously?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Patrice laughs softly. “It was kind of big news, dude.”
“Whatever,” Johnny mumbles, feeling his cheeks burn. “It wouldn’t have made sense to keep it a secret.”

“I think you’re sort of missing the point,” Patrice tells him, flopping an arm over the side of the bed to fumble around and finally pat his shoulder clumsily. “But that’s fine. I guess it all kind of blurs together, once you’re such hot shit you lose track of your individual accomplishments.”

Johnny swats him away, but catches himself smiling. It’s always been weird to think of guys on other teams, maybe guys he doesn’t even know, talking about him and Pat like that. There had been a brief moment of coaches and parents all milling around giving lectures and warnings, but as a freshman, Johnny doesn’t remember paying much attention. He just remembers Pat, and Pat’s million-watt smile trained at him every day, and Pat’s hand in his. The way they’d snuck out back to the freezing parking lot after their first win as varsity players, still in their sweaty base layers, and Pat had leaned up on tiptoe to kiss him, giggling and exhausted and exhilarated.

“You still awake?” Patrice asks after a moment.

“Yeah,” he says. “Just thinking. All that stuff when we got together seems like a really long time ago.”

“It kinda does, yeah,” Patrice says. “I heard there’s a couple of kids playing for Edmonto Municipal following in your footsteps this season, though. I guess now you get to pass the torch to them.”

Johnny snorts. “Please,” he says, flopping back over again and getting comfortable. “Nobody notices Edmonton.”

“Sure,” Patrice agrees, “except when they thrash the crap out of Madison Tech.”

He breaks off laughing when Johnny whacks him with a pillow.

--

Johnny spends two more nights with Patrice, but on Thursday during lunch, he texts his brother.

Wanna hang out tonight?

David’s response comes back quickly. Sure, if you don’t mind hanging out in my dorm while I work on a project. Come after you’re done at practice, glad to see you’re alive. Mom said you’re probably dead in a ditch somewhere.

Johnny groans. Shit, he sends back, did she call you? What did she say? But David is either back in class or ignoring him, because he doesn’t respond.

He shows up at the dorms after practice with a bag of Thai takeout.

“Dude, you rock!”, David crows, latching onto the bag without even looking at Johnny. “I ate like half a chicken at dinner, but I could totally go for pad thai right now.”

“Hi,” Johnny says, following him up the stairs. “Your welcome. Yeah, my day was fine, I guess, thanks for asking. Also, you’re kind of gross.”

David throws an eye roll over his shoulder and Johnny smirks back at him.

“Douche.”

“Brat.”
“Oh I’m the brat?” Johnny knows exactly what’s coming next, even as David’s demolishing the paper takeout bag in search of forks. He doesn’t even bother to hide the smug grin that creeps across his face. “You ran away from home, Jon. You. Mom keeps leaving me these forever-long voicemails about how you’re probably dead or kidnapped and she just doesn’t know what happened to her perfect son and heir.”

David’s impression of their mother’s voice is getting creepily good.

“I didn’t run away and she did not say that,” Johnny grumbles, grabbing the spring rolls before David can.

“No,” David concedes, “but she might as well have. The last one was like, fifty-four seconds of just I’m fine I’m fine I’m fine. Man, I’m so glad you were born first.”

As an afterthought he adds, “And yes, you kind of did run away, man.”

Johnny glowers. Probably he should feel guilty, but mostly he feels... “It feels good,” he says quietly. “To get out of there for a minute, you know?”

“Oh, dude,” David tells him emphatically, “I know. Trust me, I know. I love our parents, but I also love boarding here even when we only live, like forty minutes away. I always kinda wondered when you’d get on my level.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says quietly. He shrugs. The food is looking less appetizing than it did a moment ago. “I could’ve done without hearing how relieved she is that Pat and I finally... You know.”

David stops shoveling noodles into his face, still managing to look sympathetic even while his mouth is full.

“She said she was glad?” he asks, once he’s chewed and swallowed.

“No, no,” Johnny shakes his head. “You know she’d never be that direct. She just said it was good I could focus on other stuff now.”

“Keep it classy, Mom,” David says. He sighs. “Seriously, dude, I’m sorry about you guys, though. Sounds rough.”


They sit in silence for awhile, David still picking through the takeout containers and Johnny worrying his lower lip between his teeth.

He says, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“About Mom, or Pat, or..?” David trails off and Johnny shrugs.

“Anything. Everything. It’s like...it’s like, I had shit squared, you know? Or I thought I did. I know Mom was never thrilled about Pat, but I just figured, like. We’d graduate and go to school or get signed or whatever, and her having a stick up her ass wouldn’t matter, because things would just work out and we could do our thing.”

His face warms uncomfortably as he waits for David to -- to what? Laugh, or roll his eyes, or something.

David doesn’t do either of these things, though. Instead, he makes a low noise of agreement.
“Yeah, honestly that’s always kinda how I thought you guys would go, too. You always seemed really stupid about each other.”

“Stupid being the operative word there,” Johnny mutters darkly, and David barks a laugh.

“I meant it in the nice way, but when you say it like that...”

“Nah,” Johnny says, and suddenly he’s so so tired. The exhaustion from holding all of these things in for so long slamming into him like a physical blow, now that they’ve been spoken aloud. It isn’t entirely unpleasant. “We both were. Stupid, I mean.”

David makes a low commiserating kind of noise before asking, “So uh. What are your plans? Going home eventually or...?”

“Yeah.” Johnny groans and flops back on David’s bed, staring up at the ceiling. “I mean, what else am I supposed to do?”

“Bet you’re wishing you’d taken that Consol scholarship when you had the chance, huh?” David grins, poking him in the leg.

“Oh, shut up,” Johnny says. “There was more to it than that.”

David rolls his eyes, but he says, “I know,” with a sympathetic little nod.

David has to work on a project for freshman physics, so Johnny just absorbs himself in some reading. He doesn’t even realize how tired he is until it’s however much later and the room is dark, David collecting the book from where it’s dropped on Johnny’s chest and tugging at the blankets til Johnny rolls over.

“Shit,” he mumbles, trying to sit up. “I’ll just sleep on the floor, you have an extra blanket?”

“Shut up,” David tells him. “Just scoot over. There’s room.”

They haven’t shared a bed since the last family road trip a few years back, crammed together on uncomfortable motel beds across three states and two national parks. Now, like this, he feels so young; lying here and listening to his brother breathe quietly in the dark, until he drifts off again himself.

Chapter End Notes

all comments/kudos/feedback greatly appreciated!
Geno texts Patrice the morning after they fight.

Was it a fight? Geno’s had fights -- *they’ve* had fights -- and he’s never come out of one as confused as he is now. It keeps distracting from staying pissed.

So he texts Patrice, and then an hour later he texts him again.

He gets nothing back.

He makes himself wait until that night, alone in his room after dinner, to send another one.

Still nothing.

He considers screaming into a pillow, but ends up playing some Mario Kart with Denis, and going to bed early.

Whenever he checks his phone over the next few days, heart speeding up a little each time, he feels more and more like a douche. He turns off media alerts, just so he has less excuses to grab for his phone every time it lights up or makes a noise, meaning Nealer throws a fit at lunch because Geno missed the vine of his science project blowing up that went viral during third period.

Geno just adds that to the growing list of shit he’s kind of confused about.

“Viral?” he asks, after handing his Mountain Dew over to Nealer in penance. “Science project make people sick?”

“No,” Nealer groans, burying his face in his hands, while Sid, Duper, and Flower all cackle. “Oh my god, dude, it’s like you’re from a different planet sometimes, I swear.”

He says it like he thinks it’s charming. Exasperating, maybe, but in the endearing way of an incontinent puppy.

Geno eats lunch alone in the auditorium for the next week, watching the drama kids run rehearsals for their annual holiday showcase. The texts he gets are never Patrice, and he in turn ignores the increasingly hurt, confused messages from his friends.

They win their game on Friday, but Geno ditches the after party back at the dorms. Instead, he wakes up before dawn and drives his mother to the restaurant for opening shift, and gets to work in the back, filling a party order.

He has his headphones in and a good rhythm going as he portions, rolls, and fills dough for pastry, and doesn’t even notice his mother until she’s waving her hand in front of his face.

“Alex is here for you,” she says, after he wipes off his floury hands and tugs out an earbud.

Geno picks up his rolling pin again, reaching for the next ball of chilled, buttery dough. “Tell him I’ll call him later. I still have more than half this order to finish before tonight.”

His mother pats his arm. “I told him you’d say that, so he’s changing his shirt, and Tanya went to find him an apron.”

“Wait, what--” Geno splutters, bumping into the counter and sending up a cloud of flour. “Mom, no!
Tell him I’ll call him later, I just want to get this done.”

“So now you’ll get it done even faster,” says Alex, appearing in the doorway behind Mrs. Malkin and looking entirely unmoved by Geno’s blatant attempts to blow him off. “And, it’ll be way harder for you to ignore me.”

“I haven’t been ignoring you,” Geno grumbles, petulantly, but he moves over and hands Alex the extra rolling pin.

“Have,” says Alex. “But I don’t take it personally. You’ve always had these phases.”

“I don’t have phases,” Geno says, glaring down at his dough. “What phases?”

Alex reaches across him for one of the waiting balls of dough and a handful of flour. “Whenever you’re freaking out about something, you go all cagey and quiet and fall off the face of the earth, dude. You did it a couple years ago when you were flunking ESL, you did it last year during Consol’s losing streak, and you’ve done it for almost every one of your breakups. Don’t bullshit me, man. I know something’s up.”

Geno glances around worriedly, but his mother has long since disappeared back to the front of house.

“Fine,” he says, at last. “But what if I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Then don’t talk about it,” Alex says. He slaps his dough with the roller once, before working it into a wide, even sheet. “Just don’t mess around like we haven’t been friends forever, and I don’t know you.”

They work in silence for a long time, cutting, filling, and forming three sheets of pastry before Geno speaks up again.

“So, why did you come, if you aren’t going to try and make me talk?”

Alex shrugs, dusting off his hands and filling a glass at the industrial sink behind them. He drains half of it before he says, “Got tired of having my texts ignored.”

Geno snorts before he can help himself. He tries to turn it into a cough, but Alex’s eyebrows are already hiked into his bangs.

“Am I missing a joke?”

“No.” Geno avoids his eyes, reaching for another ball of dough, but finding the bowl finally empty. His hands curl uselessly at his sides. “No joke.”

“Then what?” Alex prompts. “You look like you’re going to throw up or something, man.”

“I thought you were okay with us not talking about this,” Geno says, voice sullen as he casts around for something to distract them. The next batch of dough is still chilling in the walk-in, though, and he got all the fillings prepped first thing when he got in.

“You might feel better if you do,” Alex wheedles, grinning with all his teeth. “C’mon, you know you want to vent. Ooh, is that Bergeron kid fucking with you again? You want to go punch him?”

“No!” Geno explodes, so vehemently that Alex actually takes a step back. “What the fuck, is anyone ever going to let that shit drop?”
“It was pretty crazy, so probably not.” Alex quells under the look Geno gives him. “I mean, sorry. I know, I should be more sensitive, or whatever. But seriously, if anyone fucked with you, I’ll punch them in the face and like it. You know I got your back, right? No matter what.”

The rage that had flared in Geno seconds before drains like air from a popped balloon. He grimaces, shaking his head. “No matter what,” he echoes.

“Well yeah.” Alex hits him in the arm, leaving a buttery, floury splotch on his shirtsleeve. “Stop acting like I’ve never been there for you when shit goes down.”

Geno takes a deep breath. Before he can let himself think, he says, “I had a fight with the person I’m dating.”

“I knew it!” Alex crows, throwing his hands up and getting even more flour on both of them. “You complete douche, you never told me! I totally guessed, though. You haven’t been weird like this since--”

“It’s different,” Geno says, loud enough to cut Alex off mid-gloat. “It’s...complicated. And weird. And I’m totally confused, I think it’s a fight? But we might just be broken up, only I don’t know for sure, and he won’t-- I mean.”

Geno feels sick. His palms are cold and his mouth is dry and he can feel the way Alex is looking at him, even if he can’t force himself to look up and meet it.

“He?” says Alex. The word in Russian sounds smooth and hard, like tumbled stones.

Jutting his chin out defiantly, Geno forces himself to meet Alex’s eyes. Daring him to say something, daring him to recoil or shout or tease. Any of the dozens of scenarios that have been running rampant through Geno’s mind for weeks.

“Seriously?” says Alex.

He doesn’t recoil, and his voice is level, but he looks young, suddenly. Eyes wide and cheeks pale, staring at Geno like he’s never seen him before. Geno kind of wishes he’d yell, instead.

“Please don’t tell anyone?” he asks, and hates himself a little for the begging note in his voice. “My dad will flip. Mom probably will, too. I don’t know--”

“So, are you gay, now?” Alex is still staring at him with that piercing gaze.

Geno frowns. “I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?” Alex asks, but he sounds genuinely curious. “I mean, if you’re dating a guy--”

“I don’t know because I don’t know,” Geno says. He’s having a hard time forcing himself to stand still and listen to anything Alex is saying. He’d much rather stick fingers in his ears and sing LA LA LA until they can agree never to ever speak about this again. “Fuck, it sounds weird when you say it out loud.”

“Say what?” asks Alex, genuinely perplexed. “Gay?”

“Yes,” Geno hisses. “For fuck’s sake, can you keep your voice down? My mom is right out front.”

“They can’t hear us out there.” Alex waves him off. “So like, what the fuck, dude? How does this
work? I thought if you liked guys that meant you were--"

“Could you maybe stop saying it?” Geno snaps. A weird expression flickers across Alex’s face. Somewhere between a smirk and a frown. “Christ. I don’t know, that’s kinda what I thought, too. But I’ve never liked another guy that I know of, and this just kind of...happened.”

“That you know of?” Alex repeats. “Don’t you know when you like somebody?”

“I thought so,” Geno says, acidly. “But I also thought I was only into girls, so who the fuck knows anymore. Everything is just weird.” He groans, sinking down onto one of the tall stools set along the prep counter.

“Everything?” says Alex, carefully. “Like, everything everything? Because maybe that means you aren’t ga--”

“I said stop saying that word out loud in here!” Geno says, glaring. “And no, that’s not what I meant. That part was fine. I meant everything else.”

He takes a great deal of vindictive pleasure at the way Alex’s cheeks flush at that, and his eyes go big again.

“Overshare, dude,” Alex says.

Geno snorts derisively. “You wouldn’t be saying that if I was talking about a girl,” he says. “If it was a girl, you’d be asking for all the details.”

Alex just looks at him. “Well, yeah.”

“So,” Geno says. “Just because you’re grossed out--”

“Woah,” Alex cuts him off, nearly slopping the rest of his water down himself. “Woah, woah, woah. I never said I was grossed out.”

“You are, though,” Geno says. He glances back up, and away again, when Alex’s eyes meet his. “Right?”

Alex is quiet for a long moment. Finally he says, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.”

“No,” Alex repeats. “I mean, I probably would be, if you were someone else.”

Something goes cold in the pit of Geno’s belly. “If you think it’s disgusting in general, it’s the same thing,” he says, quietly. “It just means you think I’m disgusting, too.”

“Okay,” says Alex, “we’re both aware that you’re the only one using the words ‘gross’ and ‘disgusting’, right? I won’t lie, I’m surprised as fuck and super confused, but I don’t think I’m the one freaking out here, G. I guess I’ve just never actually given ga-- that stuff much thought.”

“Me neither,” Geno mutters. He crosses his arms over his chest, hunching in on himself. “Or, I didn’t before.”

“How long have you guys been, uh, dating?” Alex asks, and Geno has to commend that he only flounders a little.

“Not too long,” Geno says. “We went out after that divisional outdoor scrimmage thing.”
“He plays hockey, too?” Alex’s eyebrows go up so fast, Geno’s surprised he doesn’t sprain something. “Do I know him?”

“No,” Geno says firmly, and technically that’s...mostly true. “No, and uh, I kind of don’t want to name names. He’s super private, and I don’t think he’d want--”

“Didn’t he screw you over somehow?” Alex asks, and he’s got a familiar glint back in his eye that Geno never thought he’d miss. Anything even remotely resembling familiarity at this point is like coming up for air. “Why the fuck do we care what he wants?”

“He didn’t,” Geno says, but he wavers, heels knocking against the metal legs of his stool. “I told you, it’s super confusing.”

“Try me,” says Alex.

Geno stares at him, and Alex stares levelly back, and finally Geno says, “I don’t really know what happened, that’s the problem. We were hanging out at his house, um.” He feels himself blush. “We were fooling around. It was...It was good. We were fine. And then he started asking me stuff, like what I’d done before and...And…” Geno trails off. “You’re going to think this is so stupid.”

“Again,” Alex says staunchly, “you’re the one saying that, not me.”

He pulls the next batch of dough out of the walk-in, planting one large bowl down in front of Geno, and tipping the other onto his own floury workstation. Geno looks at the bowl in front of him, and finally follows suit, giving it a few experimental pats.

“I don’t want to freak you out.”

“Do you really think I’m going to freak out, if I haven’t already?” Alex asks, shrewdly. He has a point.

Geno concedes. “Okay, so he was asking me about stuff I’d done, and I told him,” he says, all in a rush. Like letting the words all spill out of him this way, he won’t get the dry, tinny aftertaste they leave on his tongue. “And then he completely shut down. Like, he asked me had I ever been with a guy, and I told him no. He’s never had a girlfriend before, and for some reason he seemed to think it was crazy that I had.”

Alex makes a face, squashing his dough down. “Huh? That makes no sense.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying!” Geno says, throwing up his hands. “It was like, one minute everything is fine, the next he’s basically kicking me out, and hasn’t responded to any of my texts in over a week. It’s completely fucked up.”

“Completely,” Alex agrees. “So...You want to go punch him in the face?”

“You know, you might want to come up with some different ways to solve problems, besides punching people in the face,” Geno tells him.

“If it ain’t broke,” Alex says, in English, “don’t fix it.”

Geno smacks him, giving him a floury smudge across his shoulder to match Geno’s own, and making him grin.

“Thanks, though,” Geno says, busying himself with the rolling pin again. “For being cool about this, I mean. I’m not kidding, I haven’t figured anything out. It’s really stupid.”
Alex looks sidelong at him, and Geno looks back. Alex says, “You can trust me.”

“I know,” Geno says.

“No,” Alex says. “You don’t, or you wouldn’t be treating me like someone who’d fuck over my friend for telling me something like this. But it’s okay,” he adds, before Geno can cut in. “I get it. You’re right, your dad would totally lose his mind.”

Geno nods, silently.

“Does anyone else know?”

Geno shakes his head.

“Well then,” Alex says, and he’s grinning again. “I guess then I’m your man.” He glares when Geno snorts a laugh, rolling his eyes. “Shut up, you know what I mean.”

“I know,” says Geno. “I know what you mean.”
February: Patrice

Chapter Notes

OOPS SORRY let's pretend I'm on Pacific time.

After the first couple of days, Geno’s texts become fewer and farther between until they stop altogether. Patrice tries to use the excuse of hanging out with Johnny as a distraction, but he has a difficult time ignoring the sick lurch in his belly every time his phone chimes with a new message.

It gets worse once Johnny leaves. The more days pass, the more ridiculous the argument with Geno seems, and the more difficult the prospect of Patrice swallowing his pride and breaking the silence becomes.

Every time Patrice sees Danny, even though it’s been ages since the sting of their breakup ebbed and faded, he’s still a constant reminder. A reaffirmation, vindicating Patrice’s argument with himself.

Of course their next game is against Consol.

“What’s going on with you, man?” Segs asks at lunch on Friday. He’s eating an egg sandwich, and there’s cheese goo all over his face.

Patrice tries to focus on his tuna, prodding little bits of celery around with his fork. “Nothing. What’s going on with you?”

Segs snorts messily. “Nothing my ass,” he says. “You’ve been weirder and quieter than usual all week. What gives? You worried about finals or some shit?”

The afternoon bell rings signaling the end of lunch, and Patrice nearly knocks his tray off the table as he jumps at the excuse for escape.

“Um, yeah, finals, I guess,” he lies, avoiding Marchy’s beady stare and Segs’ disbelieving huff.

“Oh please, you always ace. Chill out, man. Gotta get your head on straight for tonight, those Consol fuckers are gonna be coming for us hard.”

Marchy snickers, mimicking, “Coming hard,” and Segs giggles, too, elbowing him and waggling his eyebrows.

Patrice stares at them both. “I have to go to class.”

“Get your head on straight, Bergeron,” Segs calls again after him.

“Yeah,” Marchy chimes in. “If they’re coming hard, we’ve gotta come harder!”

Behind him in the rapidly clearing cafeteria, Patrice hears the two of them collapse into giggles.

The game is brutal.
They’re deadlocked and scoreless going into the first break, and Patrice already feels like he’s about to have a heart attack. He collapses into his spot on the visitor’s dressing room bench and groans, as all around him his teammates do the same.

“T’m gonna puke,” Krug pants, sagging back against the cement wall and groping for his water bottle without opening his eyes. “Seriously, I’m gonna puke.”

“Gross,” says Danny, but he doesn’t look much better.

“Could someone remind these dicks it’s months until playoffs, still,” Marchy grumbles, massaging his ribs. Consol’s big defenseman, Letang, had checked him flat onto his back as he’d been setting up a pass for Segs, resulting in a turnover and Consol’s best scoring chance of the period.

“Don’t start making things personal,” Patrice says warningly, and Marchy rolls his eyes.

“I won’t if they won’t,” he snaps, “but it’s a little hard not to when I’m starting to feel like a fucking pinball out there in the neutral zone.”

“Get down low and keep your head up,” says Patrice. “You, too, Segs. They’re big and they keep blocking our lanes, but if we stay low and cycle, maybe we can force some lanes to clear.”

“Right, I’m sure it’ll be that easy,” Segs grumbles, and Patrice chucks a skate guard at him. “What? I’m just saying.”

“Defense, keep up the good work,” Patrice says over him, turning his attention to the defensemen, all of whom look distinctly wilted. “Tuukks, you too. You haven’t left them with a whole lot to work with, so now offense just has to pick our shit up a bit in the neutral zone, and we’ve got this.”

“Have we been playing the same game?” Marchy asks, and then ducks, as Patrice throws the other skate guard.

“Quit whining,” Patrice tells him firmly. To the room at large, he adds, “We’ve beaten these guys before, we can do it again.”

“Well said,” says Coach, trailing in after them with whiteboard in hand. He claps Patrice on the shoulder once before picking his way through the mess of gear bags to reorganize the defensive lines.

As soon as his back is turned, Marchy and Segs mime gagging behind his back, and Marchy mouths, kiss-ass, smirking at Patrice. Patrice ignores them.

The second isn’t much better.

Looch nearly nets one, but Fleury throws it right back in his face, and Consol’s right wing pinches low to clear it smoothly out of the zone for a change.

Less than a minute later, Consol gets a chance that pings off a post. It’s pure luck that it doesn’t go in, with Rask overbalancing and dropping down, leaving a wide open net on his stick side. Patrice is pretty sure he feels his heart stop for a few seconds, as Coach shouts inarticulately from behind him and the rest of the guys on the bench bang their sticks.

He uses his next shift as an excuse to channel the anxiety, swiping the puck right out from under Bennett’s nose, wheeling it around, and tearing back up the clear lane toward Fleury feeling like finally, finally something this week might go his way.
He doesn’t even have it in him to be surprised when it doesn’t. He senses someone right on his heels a second before he’s about to take the shot, and then he’s going down with a hard hip-check. He looks up from his prone position on the ice just in time to see Malkin barreling off with the puck.

*Douche.*

By the time Patrice is back on his feet, Geno is caught up along the boards with Marchy, who looks almost comically small by comparison, but still manages to jab the puck free for Segs.

Patrice follows them into the Causeway end and goes low, and they have a few seconds of quick, cycling keepaway before, quicker than thinking, finds himself down on the ice again, his shoulder throbbing from a hit.

He’s slower to right himself this time, trying to get the wind back in his lungs, and sees Geno waving off the ref. Distantly he hears, “Clean hit!” Which yeah, *right*, and sees the ref back off hesitantly. Patrice bristles.

He picks himself up and nods a confirmation to the ref, a *yeah, everything’s fine here*. Except for how shit is about to go down, thank you very much.

Patrice thought they were over this. He thought they’d dealt with their -- their *whatever* -- and moved the fuck on. Then again, he’d also thought that he’d grown as a person and cooled his head and leveled out since last time he and Geno had a run-in, but apparently that’s not true, either, because the first thing he does next time they’re both on the ice is cross-check Geno into the boards.

The whistle blows, and he gets to glower through the glass of the penalty box as Consol makes a truly magnificent show of botching their power play. It would actually be kind of funny if he didn’t know Coach is going to skin him alive for taking the cheap shot. Or if he wasn’t so busy trying to glare holes in Geno’s helmet, where he’s sitting on the Consol bench. He looks frustrated, though, so at least that’s something.

They’re still locked at 0-0 nearing the end of the second period, and it’s starting to feel like a full-blown grudge match.

Looch gets five minutes for trying to tear the head off a Consol guy who steamrolls Krejci into the boards, and less than a minute into Consol’s second powerplay, Letang gets a double-minor for high-sticking Segs in the face.

“Don’t look so fucking pleased with yourself,” Coach snaps at Segs, who blows a kiss at Letang with his bleeding lip, as Letang skates for the box. “Any more of this retaliation nonsense, playing down to their level, and you can spend a few games sitting in the stands with your mothers. I know a few JV guys who would love to fill some spots on this bench, so you just give me an excuse.”

That wipes the smirk off of Segs’ face immediately, and he quietly accepts the towel Danny hands him to mop up his mouth without rebuttal.

With less than a minute before second intermission, Patrice peripherally sees Geno spill off the bench onto the ice, racing him for a puck that Danny loses control of and sends out toward center. Patrice wins the race.

He circles around and passes to Marchy just in time, just before Geno’s stick sweeps his legs out from under him and he is, once again, lying on the fucking ice, glaring up at number 71.

“*WHAT THE FUCK?*” he hears himself yelling, but his voice gets drowned out under the announcer on the PA calling penalty. About goddamn time. “About goddamn time!” he shouts, and this time he
knows Geno hears him, skating past on his way to the box and looking like a thunderhead trapped in a helmet. Good.

Their powerplay generates two whole stupid shots on Fleury, and is otherwise exactly as embarrassing as Consol’s. Subsequently, Patrice’s adrenaline surge abates a little during the second intermission, mostly because now he can actually see all his guys’ faces, how completely exhausted they look.

“I’m pretty sure they’re actually just trying to kill us,” Krug groans, where he’s slumped over on the bench opposite Patrice. Hamilton pats his head awkwardly, gloves still on, and Krug just groans again, louder.

“Yeah,” Segs grumbles darkly. “They just need one goal to win this, and they can get it as soon as we’re all just lying around dead on the ice.”

Marchy hits him. “Fuck off, asshole. You’ll scare the freshmen,” he says. Patrice has never been more glad for Marchy and his big mouth, seeing as he’s pretty sure he’s about as capable of delivering an inspiring locker room speech right now as he is of tapdancing. “The Consol guys are wiped, too. This shit works both ways, remember? If we outlast them, then we just skate around their bodies and score. Easy fuckin’ peasy.”

On second thought, Patrice should probably just get better at inspirational speeches.

Very little about the third is easy fucking peasy, although at least his guys seem pissed enough to fight for it as the clock winds down. Patrice is pretty sure nobody on either bench wants anything to do with overtime at this point.

With six minutes left, Patrice takes the puck in and manages to create a scrum around Consol’s net, Segs and Marchy scrambling to jump on the loose puck Fleury can’t hang onto.

Patrice scoots down low, ready for a centered pass, and it’s perfect; it couldn’t be more textbook if Coach had been standing in front of them with his whiteboard. Except for how Geno fucking Malkin is suddenly right back on him, marking Patrice like it’s his job. Which it sort of is, but still.

It’s not his job to use so much elbow, and jostle Patrice’s stick nearly out of his hands, crowding him back into the boards until he almost smacks his head on the plexi. Patrice catches himself on the stanchion, using it to throw himself forward and punch Geno in his board-facing side, in the narrow strip of unprotected midriff where the waist of his pants doesn’t quite reach his chest protector. And, in theory, where no refs will catch it.

“What,” he grunts, between Geno trying to hip-check him again in retaliation, and still keep track of the puck, “the fuck is your problem?!”

Geno kicks at Patrice’s foot with his own skate and in the half-second of them both nearly going down for it, Patrice elbows him hard in the ribs.

“You kidding?” Geno gasps, somewhere between pained and incredulous, trying to swat Patrice back as he tries for a more offensive stance. “You actually stupid enough to ask me that?”

Anger flares in the pit of Patrice’s stomach. Not the low-level adrenaline fueled frustration that’s been driving him for the past couple of shifts, but the kind of bone-deep rage that’s already got him landed in the box once tonight. Luckily, the couple of seconds they’ve spent in the corner have Marchy coming up with the puck. He whips a shot on Fleury at close range, but Fleury pounces on it and the ref’s whistle stops play.
Patrice hears somebody yell, “Time out!” from one of the benches, and takes his time skating over, letting his skate blades drag in the rutted ice.

Something bumps into him, not hard, but enough to startle him out of his exhausted daze, and he turns, finding Malkin’s face inches from his, and scowling.

“What the fuck, Malkin,” he snaps, without thinking, and ignores the guilt that twinges at the look of hurt that crosses Geno’s face.

It doesn’t last long, just a split second, and then the beady glare is back. “Why you don’t text back?” he demands, low enough that nobody at the benches ten feet away would be able to hear.

“Are you--” Patrice can feel himself starting to yell, and he casts a furtive glance back over to the bench. He takes a deep, calming breath and tries again, quieter this time. “Are you fucking kidding me? You’re giving me shit all up and down the ice because I didn’t text you back?”

“I giving shit all over ice because we play hockey, this is game, I want to win,” Geno snaps acidly, and a distant part of Patrice realizes that he’s begun to notice a distinct thickening in Geno’s accent when he’s pissed off or embarrassed. Or turned on. Fuck. “I enjoy giving shit because you never text back. You care explain now, why suddenly you lose my number?”

A few yards off, the ref signals time. Patrice wants to puke a little. “No,” he hisses, and then when Geno looks mutinous, “not now. Later? After the game? Can we please not get into this shit right now, and not start another fight on the ice? We’ll both lose our fucking C’s, man. You know it.”

He tries to stare Geno down, and mostly succeeds, Geno’s shoulders eventually slumping under their pads as he huffs an irritated breath. “Fine. But we go diner after, and you explain why you suddenly decide to be fuckweasel.”

Patrice stares at him.

“Duper taught new word,” Geno says, self consciously. “I use right?”

“Yeah,” Patrice rolls his eyes. Next chance he gets, he’s gonna knock Dupuis’ teeth out of his head and make it look like an accident. “Fine. Whatever. Loser buys, though.”

He skates off back to the bench without waiting for a response, trading out center with Davy Krejci and plunking down heavily next to Thornton, who gives him a companionable bump with his elbow. “All clear, Cap?”

“Should be,” Patrice says. “I think we all just want to survive this game and go home.”

Thorty nods understandingly but doesn’t question further, and Patrice is glad. He’d mostly just agreed to Geno’s terms to see them through a clean end of the game, but now that he’s actually taking the time to think about the implications there...Fuck.

What is he even supposed to say? It took boning me for my ex to realize how straight he was and it kind of broke my heart and now you remind me of him because I’m the first guy you’ve dated?

Actually, that’s pretty honest. He could say that. But it also makes him look like a huge, stupid bag of dicks.

It’s very possible he’s being a huge, stupid bag of dicks.

Or else he’s just using completely reasonable tactics of self preservation.
He doesn’t have time to think about it more, because Coach leans over and whacks him on the shoulder. “Bergeron, you’re up.”

He goes. Screw the frustration, screw the bone-deep exhaustion.

They score with three minutes left of play. He even gets the assist, passing cleanly through three sets of Consol legs to Segs, who slides it neatly right under Flower’s pad.

After that, it feels like the climb is over and they’re on a smooth, downhill ride, just guarding their zone and running the clock until the buzzer sounds. He’s still riding high in the middle of a full-team bear hug when Geno catches his eye over Krug’s shoulder and just gives him a little nod.

Shit.
Shit, shit, shit.

Segs is predictably insufferable in the dressing room, despite all of Coach’s threatening noises about a full game analysis waiting for them on Monday.

“Yo!” he shouts, bouncing up to Patrice and halfway climbing him to lay a smacking kiss on Patrice’s sweaty forehead. “Thorty’s parents are out of town, so he said he’ll host if we wanna go over and talk about how great I am and shit. What d’you say?”

Patrice grimaces. "Can't, actually,” he says, pointedly looking anywhere but at Segs’ face. “Or, not yet. I have to go do a thing, but I can be over in like, an hour-ish.”

“You have something to do. Now. At like, nine-thirty on a Friday night.”

“Yeah, dude. Come on, it’s not a big deal.” Patrice does his best to sound dismissive, putting in an eyeroll for effect. “It’s a pain in the ass, but I'll be there in an hour. Two tops.”

Segs holds his hands up, like he couldn't care less, but Patrice knows his face. He might not be mad, but he is hurt.

"Promise," Patrice says, bumping their arms together.

It's not like he thinks anyone's going to follow him, but Patrice waits until most everybody's cleared out before walking to his car.

A very large part of him wants to tell Geno to just fuck right off. Patrice doesn’t owe him shit. It’s not like they were serious. It’s not like this should be some big flipping deal. He kind of just wants to stomp into the diner and tell Geno where he and his entitled ass can stick it.

Being mad feels good. It takes up all the attention and energy he might otherwise spend focusing on the tightness in his gut every time he considers never getting to kiss Geno again.

He misses the turn and curses under his breath, going through the next set of lights and making a U-turn in the parking lot of a 7-11.

When he finally pulls into the diner lot, Geno's sitting in his own car a few empty spots over, watching him, and Patrice can’t even procrastinate going inside. He turns off the engine and gets out, and Geno does the same, giving Patrice the same beady, appraising look he’d given him during the time-out.

In some kind of painfully awkward unspoken stalemate, neither of them says a word until they’re
both seated in a booth, jackets shrugged off and water glasses filled.

"Nice goal," Geno says. If it's a joke, Patrice has got about a million retorts ready. Geno just looks back at him steadily.

Their waitress comes over, and Geno doesn't say anything else, so Patrice says, "Pot of coffee, please," and tries to smile.

He’s tired. The game, the night, the whole stupid week, it feels like it’s all catching up to him at once, and more than anything he wishes he could blow off everything else in favor of just going home and sleeping for two straight days.

He doesn't realize he's been shredding his napkin until Geno reaches out, fingers warm and solid where they curl around Patrice’s wrist.

"What the hell," he snaps, or tries to, but it comes out flat. Geno’s fingers are loose, he could snatch his hand back any time, but he can’t seem to get his reflexes to cooperate.

"Relax," Geno says, and he sounds tired, too. "Will you just talk to me now, please?"

"Talk about what?" Patrice tries, lamely. Geno reclaims his hand, sitting back in his bench and giving Patrice an unamused, deadpan stare.

Luckily, their waitress chooses that moment to return with mugs and coffee, making a business of clattering around and pouring.

“Anything to eat for you boys?” she asks, friendly and oblivious.

“No thank you,” Geno says. “Maybe check back later, we decide.”

“Sure.” She flashes them both a smile and whisks back off toward the kitchen.

Geno takes a sip of coffee. He sighs.

“I thought we having fun,” he says, finally. His eyes flick up to Patrice’s face for a split second, and a flush of color gathers high in his cheeks. “I was having fun. I like you, I like...I like things we do. I thought you liked them, too. You seem to, but then…”

He trails off, shrugging, and Patrice shifts uncomfortably. More for something to do, he grabs a packet of sugar and begins messing with it in his lap.

“I liked it, too,” he mumbles, without looking up. He’d been all set to lie, too. Shit.

Geno makes a low, frustrated noise, and Patrice has to force himself to keep his eyes fixed on the sugar packet. “Then why you get all weird?”

His gut clenches. Patrice is pretty sure this is how skydivers feel when they pull the cord to release their parachute, but nothing happens. He’s in scrambling freefall, without a backup plan.

“It sucked not talking to you,” he blurs.

“Then why you didn’t?”

Patrice fidgets some more, focusing on how the reflection of the overhead lights warp and wobble on the dark surface of his cooling coffee.
“Because.” Suddenly just about anything he could say here sounds really douchey in his head. “You were straight before we started...Before you knew me. Right?”

Geno gives him a searching look. “Not sure what that means. I never had boyfriend, fool around with other guy. Sometimes think Tanger pretty, but everybody think Tanger pretty. Especially Tanger.”

Patrice might actually kill him. “Could you be serious, please? For like, five fucking seconds here? I swear, Geno, you asked me a question and I’m trying to explain.”

“You just asking me question,” Geno snorts. He rolls his eyes, but huffs a breath. “Yes, you first boy. But how I know if that mean I was straight? Maybe things not always so easy, so black and white.”

“I don’t know,” Patrice snaps. “But I think usually people don’t go, like, seventeen years without even considering shit like that, and then being all, surprise! This is what I’m into now!”

“And you have lots of experience, yes?” Geno asks, placidly.

Patrice glares. “More than you, I think.”

“You have more experience going seventeen years before meeting somebody and thinking, maybe this first time in life you really interested? Like maybe it feel good before, but never like this, like thinking about them all the time, never getting enough of them. And maybe you’re surprised a little, yes, because it’s not like anything you think about before. Not something you talk about at home, or see a lot, so not considering it, maybe. But now you consider it a lot.” Geno raises his eyebrows, jutting his chin out defiantly, as if daring Patrice to laugh or make fun, when all Patrice can seem to bring himself to do is stare stupidly back at him. “You have a lot of experience with these things, Bergeron?”

The use of his surname does something to jog Patrice’s brain back into gear. He takes a steadying gulp of coffee.


It all makes perfect sense in his head, but as soon as he tries to articulate anything, it just gets caught in a cluttered jumble somewhere between his brain and his mouth.

“So I was with this guy for awhile in Sophomore year. We broke up, because,” he lowers his voice, glancing edgily over at where their waitress is messing around behind the counter, “because we fucked and then he realized he was straight. He ended it, I really...I liked him a lot, okay, and it fucking sucked. There.”

It comes out in a rush, like something physical he can shove across the table for Geno to inspect so Patrice doesn’t have to look at it himself anymore.

Geno is silent for a long moment, thoughtfully sipping his coffee. At last, he says, “...That all?”

Patrice stares at him. “What do you mean? Geno, it was kind of a huge deal. I don’t- I’m done fucking around with straight boys who get curious or whatever. I can’t. It hurt too much the last time.”

Geno’s eyebrows hike up. He looks almost amused. “So,” he says, “that make you think it okay just assume I’m straight? Like everything so simple? And then maybe I decide I don’t like, so you think easier to end first by ignoring my texts?”
“I didn’t assume anything!” Patrice almost shouts, and then ducks down in his booth bench when their waitress glances up. “I didn’t. I was just...I didn’t want to deal with that shit again.”

“Patrice,,” Geno says slowly, after a long sip of coffee. “I always think you smart. Even when just seeing you in games. Now, not so sure.”

Patrice sputters indignantly, opening his mouth to retort, but Geno steamrolls over him.

“Why so hard to just tell me this, instead of ignore me?”

There are about a million things Patrice wants to say in response, but all that comes out is, “Because I don’t like talking about it.”

His hands are shaking around the lukewarm mug he’s still clutching, and his skin is all prickly-cold. He glances up and catches Geno’s gaze and shrugs once before dropping it again.

Geno sighs. “I’m sorry you got hurt,” he says. Patrice shrugs again, still staring into his coffee. “But you try to do same thing to me he did to you. How that make better?”

“I didn’t–” Patrice starts, but stops just as quickly, biting his lip. At least Danny’d had the decency to actually call Patrice and be honest. “Fuck,” he says. He looks up at Geno, who’s watching him inscrutably over the rim of his coffee mug. “Fuck.”

“You kind of did,” says Geno.

Patrice gets another one of those sick swoops in the pit of his stomach. “I wasn’t thinking about it that way.”

“No,” Geno agrees.

They’re both quiet for a couple of minutes after that. Patrice pours himself some more coffee, mostly for something to do, and Geno fiddles with his spoon and stares out the dark window.

“Did I ever give you a reason to think I don’t like you? That I don’t like...” he trails off, gesturing vaguely and looking momentarily self conscious. “That I don’t like things we do.”

Patrice shakes his head, not meeting Geno’s eyes.

“No,” Geno agrees.

He’s quirking the edge of a smile, a little of the old familiar warmth creeping back behind his eyes, and Patrice chances a halfhearted kick at his ankle under the table.

“I dunno, because I’m not into girls?”

“Yes,” Geno says decisively, like he’s just proved a point. “You know what you like. Like me, I know what I like.” He looks very pointedly at Patrice. “You like me, too?”

Geno even looks a little nervous, like it’s just now occurring to him after all this argument that maybe Patrice just isn’t interested.

“I like you,” Patrice says, decisively.

“Then what we do? What you want?”
Patrice bites his lip, shrugging. “Uh. Like. Could we...just keep doing what we were doing?”

There’s an embarrassingly hopeful upward tilt to the last words and he feels his cheeks burn.

Geno, though, has a smile like the sunrise; warmth creeping upward and softening his eyes, practically glowing, until Patrice is afraid he might have to squint if he keeps staring like this.

“I would like that,” Geno says. “And you talk to me instead of ignoring me, if you freaking out again?”

Patrice rolls his eyes, but nods. “Yes, jeez. So long as you don’t ever pull that shit on the ice again, okay? No matter what’s going on with us.”

Geno snorts. “I tell you, that was just me playing game. Only liked it extra because mad at you.”

“Whatever,” Patrice says. “I can’t be your boyfriend out there, I have to be a captain. If we have shit going on between us, it can’t be part of our games.”

Geno’s eyebrows shoot upwards, and his face lights up again. “Boyfriend?”

Patrice stares levelly at him. “Really not what I meant to be the takeaway there, dude.”

“That debatable,” Geno mutters, still smiling like an idiot. “Yes yes, captain important, too. My guys skate into wall without my fearless leading. Your guys just sit on ice and cry.”

“They’d still kick Consol’s ass,” Patrice counters, and then, “which reminds me, you’re paying for this coffee tonight, loser.”

Geno shoots him a dark look, somewhat offset by the way he still looks qualifiably giddy, but digs a five out of his wallet, throwing it down on the table with an overwrought huff. “Fine, fine. Hope you like putting salt in wound. Maybe you like whole celebration pie, too? I think they have behind counter.”

“Oh, shut up,” Patrice snorts. “It was a close match. It’s not like we curbstomped you.”

“Right.” Geno finishes off his coffee and sets the empty mug down with a thunk. “Next time we wipe ice with you, you pay for coffee. Maybe also burger.”

They make out in Patrice’s car for a few minutes after Geno settles the bill, until the windows are fogged but they’re both shivering a little without the heater on. Geno keeps running fingers through Patrice’s hair, though, and sucking on his earlobe, so it’s really hard to care much about the cold.

Finally, Geno sits back and sighs. “I tell Duper I go hang out at his house tonight.”

“Shit!” Patrice had completely forgotten about Thorty’s, and it’s got to be well over an hour now. “Me, too. I mean, I told Segs I was going to Thornton’s party. Uh,” he tries to think fast, but mostly all he can focus on are Geno’s fingers resting over the curve of his thigh. “What are you doing tomorrow? I have soccer with Toews, but then I’ve got the afternoon free.”

Geno lights right back up. “I text you when done at restaurant? Should be little after noon.”

“Yeah.” Patrice leans back over the emergency brake to kiss him again. “Yeah.”
February: Johnny

“Hey.”

Johnny’s fingers clench where he’s digging around in his locker for a notebook. He takes a deep
breath, willing himself to turn around.

“Hey, Pat,” he says, taking in the familiar gray sneakers, skinny legs in faded denim, and the
oversize Letterman jacket. “How’s it going?”

Pat’s mouth twists into something that looks like it’s trying to be a smile, but needs a lot more
practice before it gets there.

“You have a minute?” Pat asks, and the nerves in Johnny’s stomach tighten.

“Yeah, I guess,” he says, pushing up to his feet. “What’s up?”

Pat clears his throat, and Johnny can’t help but watching the way he moves. Alien and too familiar,
all at once.

“I had a party,” he says, eyes darting down and away and over Johnny’s shoulder. "You didn't
come.”

“You-- Oh.” Johnny shrugs, shuffling the papers in his hands without really seeing them. “Yeah, I
heard it was pretty cool.”

“It was,” says Pat. “Bryan rented ice at that outdoor rink up near Edmonton, it was great.”

“Great,” Johnny echoes, and the word echoes hollowly in his ears. His voice sounds flat and stupid,
and the silence stretches awkwardly on between them. “Are you dating that girl?”

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Pat shifts stiffly from foot to foot. “Yeah, I guess. We haven’t really, like, defined it or anything, but
yeah. We’re hanging out.”

“Hanging out,” Johnny says, and his mouth is doing something uncomfortable and twisted around
the corners. “Right.”

Pat flinches.

Johnny sags in on himself. “I didn’t mean that like it came out,” he says, but he did, and they both
know it. His hand twitches of its own accord, reaching out and then abruptly falling back to his side,
as if to do something crazy like touch at Pat’s arm.

Johnny has the insane urge to laugh. Instead, shoves his hands as deep into his pockets as they’ll go
and says, “What the fuck are we even doing right now, man? What is this?”

He’d meant to ask why Pat had spoken to him in the first place, but Pat draws him up short by
saying, “I think about you all the time.”

They’re standing in a busy hallway milling with people, but Johnny can’t focus on any of that right
now. He can’t breathe, feels like there’s not enough air in his lungs, feels like there’s not enough air
anywhere. He’s played a million versions of this conversation over and over through his head: The
pained confessions, the pleas for forgiveness; falling into each other’s arms and blah blah blah.

“I, uh,” Johnny tries, swallowing dryly. He blurs, “Me too,” and Pat’s there, he’s right there, reaching out himself, this time. Johnny moves closer, too, not realizing that he’s leaning into Pat’s hand on his hip until Pat’s fingers tighten.

He’s not wearing a jacket, t-shirt riding up where Pat’s touching him, and it’s been weeks, but Pat’s hand settles there easy as slipping on an old pair of shoes; effortless and familiar. Johnny makes a noise, a soft sort of hiccup in his throat, and something behind Pat’s eyes shutters and he pulls away.

Whatever this was is over as soon as he steps back, and they’re both red-faced and awkward all over again.

“Johnny,” Pat tries, but Johnny shakes his head.

“I’m not helping you make a habit of cheating,” he says. He’s still standing close, hands curled into fists in his pockets.

It would be easier if Pat started shouting. Easier to get mad and shout back, than to stand still and quiet and contained with this too-small space between them.

“Fuck you, man,” Pat says, finally, but his voice is soft and there’s a tremor to it that keeps Johnny’s temper at bay.

“Pat,” Johnny tries, but he’s at a loss for what comes next.

Pat shakes his head, shifting his bag where it hangs unceremoniously from one shoulder. “I’ll see you at practice, Toews,” he says, already moving away down the hall.

Johnny doesn’t say anything else. He stands stupidly in front of his open locker, notebook forgotten as he watches Pat disappearing behind a gaggle of freshman girls.

--

At home, dinners have been weird.

Not terrible, per se. Johnny hasn’t felt a burning need to throw his fork down and slam out of the room lately, which is progress, but he’s also not used to the silences.

His dad seems relatively unfazed by the events of the last month, just pausing to give Johnny a swift, tight hug when he’d finally come home, clapping him on the arm, and asking if he’ll help take out the recycling. Johnny and his dad share an appreciation for efficient communication.

His mother’s loss for words, however, is entirely unprecedented, and, by the third night, deeply unsettling.

“She’s just afraid of upsetting you again,” his dad tells him. It’s late Monday evening and Johnny is curled up on the couch next to his dad’s recliner in the den, watching the news at low volume.

Johnny snorts. “Are you kidding? When has Mom ever been afraid of registering her opinion about anything?”

“You should give her a break.” His dad’s voice is soft, but with a rare, stern edge Johnny usually associates with David. It’s jarring to be on the receiving end for once. “She was really worried when you left like that. We both were, Jon. That wasn’t okay.”
“It’s not like I left the state or something,” Johnny says, defensively. I was still going to school and practice and games and everything. I was with Bergy for most of it. She knew I was with Bergy, seeing as how she tracked me down at soccer with the kids. She knew exactly where I was.”

His dad sighs, hitting the mute button as the news goes to commercial, and plunging the room into silence. “You’re missing the point, I think,” he says at last. “You’re not eighteen yet, kiddo. You’re still in high school, you aren’t grown up. You shouldn’t be able to just disappear off on your own for days at a time, even if we do know where you are. Even for someone as responsible as you.”

Johnny picks at a hangnail to avoid his father’s eyes, hunkering down a little lower in his seat. “Yeah, well. She doesn’t have to tiptoe around me like I’m a bomb about to go off at any moment.”

“Aren’t you?” His dad’s tone is light, innocuous enough, but Johnny knows better. He flinches. “I’m...better. I think I’m better.”

His dad nods, eyes following a soundless commercial for coffee. “You’ve been dealing with a lot lately, of course you’re stressed. And losing Pat must hurt like hell. But that’s no excuse to take it out on people who care about you.”

Hearing Pat’s name out loud like that sets a ringing in Johnny’s ears, dulling out anything else his dad is trying to say. It’s humiliating, the way he can spend day in and day out navigating his life away from the guy, and then just this quiet little kindness tightens his throat and makes his eyes sting. “I know,” he says, almost too soft to hear as his dad unmutes the television. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

“You don’t need to apologize to me,” his dad says. “But maybe talk to your mom, okay? I think it’d do you both some good.”

Johnny says, “I know,” even as his insides squirm. The last thing he wants is another sanctimonious lecture about how she’d been right about Pat all along. “I’ll work on it.”

“Good,” says his dad, and he settles back in his recliner.

Johnny pulls out a book he’s supposed to have read for English by the end of the week, and they spend the rest of the hour in companionable silence. When his dad finally turns off the TV and gets up, he leans down and plants a kiss on the top of Johnny’s head.

“I’m glad you’re back,” he says. “I missed you. If you think it’s too quiet now, just think how weird it’ll be once you’re off at college and David is boarding. Your mother and I will just be rattling around in this place, all alone.”

“Ha ha,” says Johnny. “‘Night, Dad.”

His dad just says, “Don’t stay up too late.”

Johnny hears his muffled footsteps retreat up the stairs to the master bedroom above him, and then his mother’s muffled voice, followed by his dad’s low rumble. He wonders if his dad is telling her what they’d just talked about, but somehow he doubts it. His dad wouldn’t make it that easy for him. They’re both asleep when he goes up to bed himself, or at least, the light is off under their door. He’s exhausted, going through the motions of brushing his teeth and washing his face on autopilot, but it’s a long time lying in the dark in his own bed before Johnny finally drifts off.

He dreams about Patrick.
Pat smiling at him the way he used to, like Johnny was the only thing he wanted to see. The way he’d slip his hand into Johnny’s any time they were walking together, to the point of annoyance when Johnny wanted to juggle a coffee cup or his phone. His flagrant disregard for the school’s policy on public displays of affection, and their staring peers.

In the dream, though, Johnny doesn’t shove him off. Doesn’t play it off like a joke or a burden, just lets Pat invade his space until he’s climbed into Johnny’s lap, kissing and touching and panting familiar little sighs Johnny hadn’t even noticed forgetting about, until he wakes up abruptly with cold sweats and a boner. It’s three minutes before his alarm.

He jerks off in the shower, glaring flatly at the white tile and thinking about Clive Owen, new skates, Lamborghini, scoring game winning goals; anything that isn’t Pat.
February: Geno

Geno would really like to know where the hell people find time to have relationships.

He wakes up at 7:37 on Monday morning in a panic, groping for his phone and swearing as he half falls, half lunges out of bed. He can’t even remember if he’d even set an alarm for himself to sleep through. The last thing he remembers is getting into bed with his laptop for a WoW session with Flower, and then…

Sure enough, his unopened laptop is folded next to him in the twisted mess of blankets like a teddy bear. Flower is going to be pissed.

He tugs on yesterday’s uniform pants, grabs his bag, and tears for the door without even bothering to comb his hair. His parents and Denis are gone, the bus is gone, and if he wants to get to school at anything resembling on time, he’s got to jog down to the restaurant and borrow the car.

Shit.

By the time he’s eaten a roll at his mother’s insistence, convinced her he’ll be back before 6 so she can go to her book club meeting, and kissed her goodbye, it’s already 8:03, and the usual traffic is even more backed up than usual.

By some miracle, Geno only rolls into a parking spot in the day lot about five minutes after first bell, with another five before homeroom is set to start. He’s sweaty, he’s rumpled, he probably forgot at least one textbook, but fuck it, he’s here. Geno makes it into a seat in the back as the last warning bell chimes.

He catches up with Flower after homeroom, heading for the East wing where they share an English class. It’s telling that Flower doesn’t even slow down when Geno calls his name, but he does glance sidelong at him once Geno catches up, panting a little.

“You blew me off last night,” Fleury says. His expression, already predisposed to looking a little haughty, could peel paint. “Again.”

“Again?” Geno echoes. “What you mean, again?”

“I mean,” Fleury says, barging unceremoniously through a cluster of underclassmen at the base of a stairwell, “I keep saying we should hang out, or play, or whatever, and you keep being all, ‘yeah yeah totally!’ and then nothing. And when I finally do get you to agree to a time, shit like last night happens.”

“That has never happened before!” Geno says, maybe a little too loudly, because a few heads turn on their way up the stairs. “I get laptop, I get ready to play, and then boom, next I know, waking up and morning already. Sorry,” he adds, a bit more sullenly than originally intended.

Flower gives him a long, searching look, one hand on the classroom door, before saying, “Okay, fine.”

“We’re cool?”

“We’re cool.”

They sort themselves into their usual seats at the back of the room, Geno digging through his bag to
find the loose jumble of notes he has stuffed at the bottom.

“But you still owe me one,” Fleury says, and the haughty look is back. “I know you’re busy and everything, with the restaurant and stuff, and whoever you’ve been texting nonstop when you think nobody’s looking, but c’mon, man. You’ll have plenty of time to be boring and old later.”

“I,” Geno starts, and then flounders. “Texting?”

Flower rolls his eyes. “Please. Sometimes you get this dopey, stupid grin when you’re on your phone. But I’m not pissed and I don’t say anything, because I know you wouldn’t actually be ditching your boys for some secret chick. Right?”

“Right,” Geno says, weakly.

“You think you’re so smooth,” Flower says, and the easy, teasing tone is back. “But don’t forget, I’ve been friends with you since the beginning.”


“Yeah, the beginning of what?” says Sid, sliding into his seat in front of theirs and pulling out his laptop, and a notebook, and an array of writing utensils. Flower immediately swipes one of the pens.

Geno shrugs at him, and Sid shrugs back.

“This guy has a secret girlfriend,” Flower says, using his commandeered pen to gesture at Geno. Cameron, one of the girls Geno had dated briefly last winter, stiffens slightly in her chair.

“He does not have a secret girlfriend,” Sid says, rolling his eyes. “When would he even have the time?”

Geno is intensely relieved when the class gets called to order, and Flower doesn’t have a chance to voice the smart remark he looks like he’s bursting to make. Instead, he settles back into his chair, and the other two follow suit, Sid still glancing back a couple of times with questioning glances that Geno pretends not to see.

“Grab your coat and let’s just hang out in the field behind the art room, man,” Flower says later, after they’ve waved Sid off to AP chem and dropped stuff off at their lockers on the first floor.

Geno has some Geometry he should probably be working on, or maybe the essay they just got for English, but he nods and follows Fleury toward the back exit without further protest.

It’s not too cold out, especially for February, but the rec field is still a swath of drab brown scrub that crunches under their feet as they head for the fieldhouse, a looming stone and mortar relic from an age of boarding schools past. It makes for a convenient buffer between them and the wind and the rest of the school, though, with nobody else in sight. There’s only the distant woods at the edge of the school grounds to hem them in, and the sky above an ugly, gunmetal gray. In Geno’s pocket, his phone buzzes loudly. Patrice usually checks in before third period, and Geno could try to stop his smile, but Fleury is already rolling his eyes.

“Here we go.”

“Here what goes?” Geno asks, trying to sound innocent. “I don’t even know who sending text.”

“It’s okay, G,” Fleury says with a laugh, making sure no one’s around before slipping a joint out of his pencil case. “You can text your secret girlfriend.” He drops onto his back, and Geno takes
another cursory glance around to make sure nobody’s coming before collapsing next to him.

“Not secret girlfriend, Flower,” Geno says, laying down and using his bag as a headrest. He only realizes how sick of lying about this he is after he says it; after he hears his own voice mince over the word girlfriend. Maybe it’s the residual bolstering effects of Alex not completely freaking out on him.

Flower takes another drag, offering it over, even though he knows Geno’s going to refuse.

“What,” Flower says, unfazed. “You wanna tell me you have a secret boyfriend?”

There is no reason for his heart to be hammering like this, he thinks. No excuse for the sweaty palms and sudden driving interest in some random stem of grass he’s now twirling between his fingers instead of making eye contact.

“Is that what this whole thing has been about?” Flower asks.

“No,” Geno says, shoving him away with a forced laugh. His heart is beating so fast in his chest it’s a miracle Flower can’t hear it with how close he’s sitting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah,” Flower says, eyes still narrowed. “Right.” He takes one last drag from the blunt before grinding it out against the dirt. He’s frowning as he looks back over at Geno, but doesn’t say anything else.

“Not what you think,” Geno tries, and Flower rolls his eyes.

“You don’t know what I think,” he says and Geno hates that he’s right.

They’re both quiet for a moment, breath fogging in the late winter air.

“He not secret,” Geno tries again. “But I-- I mean. He’s...” He’s at a loss for words, but that seems about right. Patrice is a lot of things. Too many things to name. “He good, Flower. You like him, probably.”

He doesn’t ask Fleury not to tell.

It was maybe only a semi-conscious decision, just like letting this shit slip to the biggest mouth on the team. Like, maybe Flower doing that thing where he acts as the official Consol Academy news ticker could just save Geno the trouble of some big coming-out routine.

You can’t un-ring the bell of Marc-Andre Fleury.

Geno’s sense of accomplishment lasts exactly as long as it takes for a new school morning to roll around, at which point he wakes up and has to spend a good minute or so trying to figure out why it feels like the day of a huge test or something.

Fuck.

He blames the contact high.

He’s not even sure what he’s expecting when he gets to class. Weird looks from the guys? Whispers? Muttering? The rolodex of clichés flips through his mind as he settles into homeroom, but there’s nothing so obvious. Maybe give it until lunch, he thinks.

At lunch, everything still appears normal.
Or, as normal as things ever are, with Sid sitting there and meticulously filling in a nutritional tracker on his one side, and Flower, Paulie, and Nealer having a milk-chugging contest on the other. The most he gets is Flower casting him a little sidelong smirk when Geno’s phone buzzes with a text.

The rest of the week isn’t much different, and by Friday he’s pushed it from his mind.

They’re playing the Union High Blue Jackets that night, which isn’t a huge rivalry match, but everyone’s buzzing a little, anyway. It’s standing tradition for the captain to lead a quick voluntary warm up on the ice for anyone who wants it after classes end, before everybody dissipates for a couple hours to take naps or dick around online or whatever it is they do to get pumped. He’s already got his skates laced when he bothers to check his phone and sees a message from Denis about covering his shift tomorrow afternoon.

There’s no reception in the cement cave of a locker room, but they’ve got ten minutes before they need to be on the ice, so he slips on his skate guards and excuses himself down the hall to the back door to respond. Coming back in, he doesn’t register the voices echoing down the narrow space until he’s about to turn the corner back into the locker room.

“-glued to his phone,” Duper’s saying, laughing about something. “G’s gotta tell us who she is eventually, right?”

Geno stops short just outside the doorway.

“Oh my god.” That’s Tanger’s voice. “Why are you guys so convinced-- why do you even care if Geno’s dating anyone? You guys sound like a bunch of eighth grade girls.”

“Get over yourself, asshole,” says Neal’s voice. “We only care because he’s being all secretive and shit and making it a big deal.” He snickers. “Hey, I bet she goes to a different school or something. He’s probably worried about the rivalry.”

“This isn’t Shakespeare,” Flower’s voice chimes in, sounding supremely disdainful like he always does when he knows things other people don’t and wants them to realize it. “Why are you guys so convinced it’s a girl he’s texting with, anyway? Have any of you seen anything you’d like to share with the class?”

It’s bait and everyone knows it, including Geno. He’s strongly considering running off back down the hall and just going home before the game until he realizes that he’s wearing full gear and skates, and besides that, his keys are still in his bag in the locker room. He can’t even just go out to the ice ahead of them, because his helmet and gloves are still in there, too. Fuck.

There’s a quiet pause, and then Duper says, “What do you know, Flower?” at the same time as Glass’s voice says waringly, “Shut up, Fleury.”

Glass. Shit, Geno hadn’t even thought about him, their conversation about Patrice seems like it happened in a different lifetime. Before he and Patrice had even started dating.

Meanwhile, there’s a small explosion of voices in the locker room. Geno can just pick out Fleury practically yelling gleefully at Glass, “He told you? What did he tell you?” while Tanner keeps stoically saying things like, “None of our business,” and “Shut up, Flower,” and Duper tries to be heard over them, asking, “You’re talking about Malkin secretly dating a guy, right? Geno’s dating a dude?”

What’s that English idiom they were talking about in ESL last week? Something about wishing the earth would just open up and swallow him whole.
Yeah. That.

He’s still standing rooted to the spot when Tanger comes clomping out around the corner and nearly runs into him.

Tanger draws up short in surprise, knocking into the row of sticks leaned against the wall just outside the room, and sending them all clattering to the floor. All conversation in the locker room comes to an abrupt halt.

Nealer’s face appears around the corner. “What the fuck?” he says, and then he sees Geno and his eyes get huge. It would be funny if Geno weren’t so distracted trying not to barf on his skates.

“Uh,” Neal says, but Geno cuts him off, plastering on what he hopes is a wide, easy smile.

“Just come back to get gear,” he says, and shit, his voice sounds all loud and brittle. He shuffles past Tanger and Neal into the locker room and beelines for his stuff, conveniently looking anywhere but at his teammates, who have all gone frozen-still and silent. And they said he’s bad at subtlety.

He secures his helmet and slips on his gloves, and when he turns back around they’re all still fidgeting awkwardly.

“Well?” he says, making a show of staring around at all of them. Duper drops the stick tape he’d been making a big show of messing with. “What waiting for? Go hit ice already.”

They go, heading for the door in a jumble of clattering sticks and practice jerseys rustling over pads, clearly grateful for the excuse to move. Only Glass lags behind a little, casting hesitant glances up at Geno’s face as stands by the door, waiting to follow them out. He smiles a little and Geno smiles back.

“I’m, uh,” Tanner starts, clearly about to apologize, but Geno just shakes his head.

“No worries,” he says firmly. “Team still play good? That all that matter. If just listen to C still, that’s good enough.”

Glass looks almost angry when he says, “Dude, you are the C. You’re our fucking captain. They know that.” but Geno just shrugs.

“Come on. Not keep waiting,” he says, and Glass finally concedes, letting Geno follow him out onto the ice.

Practice is good. Actually, it’s really good, with all the guys practically falling over themselves to work through the few easy drills he sets them, to the point where he starts to wonder if there’s a way he can keep them so hellbent on not pissing him off for real, mandatory practices.

He spends the hours before the game disinterestedly chewing a caffeinated Clif Bar and pretending to watch How To Train Your Dragon for the millionth time, while actually just fidgeting with his phone. Finally, he texts Patrice.

Sort of told team I’m gay.

It’s the extremely condensed version, and missing a few key facts and technicalities, but everything’s too tangled up in his head for the English words to sort themselves out on the little screen.

He knows Patrice has got to be home by now. Causeway doesn’t have a game tonight. Sure enough, he gets a text back almost immediately.
WHAT???
followed closely by
what happened?!
and then, in rapid succession,
wait since when are u gay?
calling urself gay
u know what i mean

Geno actually cracks up, shaking his head as he tries to sort out the words.

Slow down, you break thumbs, he sends, and then, Sort of told Flower monday, he tell bunch of guys
today because of huge mouth. Is probably ok tho. Not tell about you, just about me.

There’s a longer pause this time, but Patrice just sends, they’re not being assholes, right?
No. Practice good. Glass probably fight them all at once if being assholes.

yeah i know. he punched Ty last year.

Someday, Geno figures he and Patrice are going to have a conversation about why and how Patrice
is best friends with a guy who’ll use bigoted slurs against members of opposing teams on the ice, but
this is not that day.

He just types, I remember. Is okay tho I think. Then, as an afterthought, Saying gay easier than
saying I like getting in Patrice Bergeron’s silly color pants.

ur not cute Patrice replies, but then, see u tmrw right?

Yeah. Later tho. Covering day shift, he sends, and a part of him aches with it. He wishes that later
could be now, that he could just ignore everything and fold himself into Patrice and the space they’ve
carved out along the seam of their coexisting lives.

He wishes, right up until he glances at the time on his phone and gets the familiar little jolt of pre-
game anxious excitement.

Right on cue, his phone buzzes with, k. good luck tonite, text me the score after. i’ll see it when i
wake up. xx

He shoots off ok thx )))

Any residual anxiety he’s carrying from earlier in the afternoon is smothered by the comfortably
routine pre-game rituals. Coach gives them a long speech about not slacking off just because Union
isn’t a heavy contender, don’t pull any dumb shenanigans on the ice, yadda yadda yadda. The usual.
Then there are warm ups, followed by Geno’s perfunctory Captain-speech, Play good or else,
accompanied by a wide smile. It’s mostly a joke, but everybody cheers anyway.

He stands by the locker room door as always, fist-bumping the guys as they leave, until just Flower,
Duper, Nealer, Glass, and Tanger are left, conspicuously lagging behind. Geno can suddenly hear
his heart pounding in his ears.

They don’t say anything, though. Glass just smiles brightly and gives him a fist-bump before heading out, and the other guys follow suit. “We got your back, G,” Duper says quietly, matching stride with Geno, who tries not to blush or laugh or die of embarrassment right there in the dim, musty hallway.

He just says, “Thanks,” and bumps their shoulders together, shooting him a grin that Dupuis returns sheepishly before they hit the ice.

They proceed to royally kick Union High’s ass.

Not in the colloquial sense, even, but as a straight-up, good old fashioned thrashing. The final score is 6-0, which is the highest number of goals against that anybody’s been able to rack up on Union all year, thanks to the new sophomore kid they’ve got guarding the net. Geno might almost feel bad for him, shuffling off the ice dejectedly after the rest of his slouching team, if he weren’t too busy being flattened by his own guys in celebration.

The relief he hadn’t had time to feel earlier is suddenly cascading through him, tumbling and raucous as the shouts and cheers in the room and dwarfing even the simple thrill of victory. He can’t concentrate on anything else.

“Party up in the res hall!” Paulie’s yelling, and there’s an immediate rush to coordinate who needs to go out and get what.

Geno tugs the back of Flower’s sweater to draw his attention away from the squabble over who has the most convincing fake ID. “Hey, I need run errand. Tell guys I be there soon?”

Flower’s expression settles into a knowing smirk. “Use protection,” he mutters, and then winces when Geno punches him hard in the arm. “Fine then, douchebag. Don’t. Get the clap, see if I care.”

Geno hits him again, but he’s laughing too hard to get any real force behind it. “Thanks,” he calls over his shoulder, and Fleury waves him off.

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Patrice’s phone rings to voicemail five times before he finally picks up with a sleepy, “Huh?”

“We won,” Geno says without preamble. He’s grinning so hard his face hurts. “Six-oh. Think I saw their baby goalie cry.”

Patrice laughs sleepily. “Shit, did the game just finish? I went to bed at like, ten.”

“Little while ago. You only sleep half hour, sorry.” He’s so, so not sorry. “Wish you could have watched,” he says.

“Me too.” Patrice sounds like he’s waking up a little, especially when he says, “Wait, holy shit, six-zip?”

“I score twice,” Geno says proudly, and then something stupid and swoopy happens in his chest when Patrice laughs. “Now look out window at street. Is freezing out here.”

“What?” There’s some muffled blanket-noises and then Patrice’s face appears, pale and ghostly in street light reflecting off his second floor bedroom window.

Geno leans out of the car and waves. “Seriously,” he says into the phone. “Cold as balls.”
He just hears more laughing, and then the line goes dead, Patrice’s face disappearing from the window. He reappears a few seconds later, slipping out the front door and running across the street in nothing but some blue pajama pants and one of his plain white undershirts. He dives shivering through the passenger side door Geno has waiting open for him, yanking it shut behind himself.

“Holy fuck you weren’t kidding,” he says, and then, “Cold as balls!” and finally “Nice job, winner,” with that sweet, shy little grin he still gets sometimes, like he’s not really sure if he’s using the right words. Geno can commiserate.

The engine’s still on and he cranks the heat as high as it’ll go before ducking in, catching the curve of Patrice’s jawline in his palm and kissing him soundly. “Thanks,” he says when they break apart for air.

Patrice reaches a hand up, stroking Geno’s shower-damp hair back off his forehead; still so close their noses brush. “Yeah,” he says. “Well it wasn’t my team you beat, was it?”

Geno just laughs and kisses him again.
February: Patrice

True to Geno’s word, Consol kicks the shit out of Causeway in their next matchup.

Patrice follows his guys back to the visitor’s locker room after the final buzzer with the scoreboard reading five-two. Everyone’s pretty quiet as they rinse off and dress, filtering out the back entrance with only the occasional mutinous muttering.

“Bergy! Hey, hey, dude hold up.”

Segs catches up to Patrice, yelling over the ungainly thunk thunk thunk his gear bag is making on its unbalanced wheels in the narrow cement-bricked hall.

Patrice slows, and Segs glances around himself like he’s trying to make sure they’re alone.

“But Marchy had an idea,” Segs says, barely able to suppress a gleeful grin. “Davy overheard a couple of the Consol guys talking about a party up in their res hall, and he says he knows the back way up, with the stairs. We’re crashing and you’re coming.”

“I dunno…” Patrice bites his lip. “Dude I’m fucking wiped, this game sucked, I just wanna go home and--”

“That’s the whole point!” Segs hisses insistently, bouncing a little on the balls of his feet. “They kicked our asses, so we’re gonna go steal their booze and get with their ladies.”

“Great,” says Patrice flatly, but Tyler looks like he’s about to snap under his own tension if Patrice even thinks about letting him down. “I’ll come, I guess. Sure. Just gimme a sec to stick shit in my car.”

“Yeah, yeah!” Tyler beams. “Me too. Davy said to catch up with him at the back outside corner of the rink, over by the trees, in like five minutes.”

Patrice stows his gear, and Segs shoves his in Marchy’s trunk when Marchy catches up with them a minute later.

“It’s this way,” Marchy tells them, leading them around the long, low building that houses the rink. It butts up against Consol forest preserve on one side, and there’s a chainlink fence, probably meant to keep students on the school-side of things, but even in the dark Patrice can count three spots where it’s curled up on itself, for obvious escape routes.

Krejci’s waiting for them next to a wide rain gutter, dicking around on his phone. He jumps when Segs hisses his name.

“Seriously?” Segs snickers, ignoring the elbow Marchy jabs into his ribs. “Dude, this isn’t Ocean’s Eleven. We’re just crashing a party, calm the fuck down.”

Davy ignores him. “Come on,” he whispers, as if there’s anyone around to hear. Or care. The lingering fragments of his accent are somehow thicker at low volume. “Stairs are this way.”

Segs is still smirking, and Marchy gives him another jab to the ribs, muttering, “Dude, don’t be a fucking moron or I swear I will make you wait in the car.”

“Try it,” Segs baits him, and Marchy silently mimics try it, sticking out his tongue.
“Remind me why I agreed to this,” Patrice mutters to no one in particular, as they start up what looks like a fire escape attached to the back of the smallest residence hall. “And why I even speak to you people.”

Marchy spares him a disdainful glance. “Please, Bergeron. We make you interesting.”

Even Davy cracks up, punching Patrice in the arm. “He’s right. Otherwise you’re just a boring mud-stick captain like Madison has.”

“Stick in the mud,” Patrice corrects reflexively. And then, “Hey, Johnny’s fine. We hang out, he’s not boring.”

This just earns him three sets of snickering, and Davy adds, “Sure. And this is why we say you’re lucky to have us.”

He tries the door knob at the top of the stairs before Patrice can snipe back, and the door swings open, sounds of yelling and music and general partying spilling out into the night.

“After you,” Davy grins, looking at them and holding out his arm like an usher.

Any of Patrice’s worries about them standing out were a huge waste of time.

He’s not really sure how the residence hall situation works at Consol, but clearly there’s no adult in charge to reign things in tonight. Once they slip down the first corridor and around another couple of corners, they’re greeted by a horde. A loud, rowdy horde, all jumping around and bouncing to some loud, rowdy music.

“Fuckers,” he hears Marchy mutter next to him. Patrice pats his arm soothingly.

“I am nice,” Marchy sniffs, looking haughty.

“Well then, be good,” Patrice amends, which just earns him an eyeroll. “I’m serious, getting arrested or some shit is not an option. I will see coach bench your ass so fucking hard, don’t think I won’t.”

On his other side, Davy looks a little nervous suddenly, like he’s only now weighing the possibilities, and Marchy’s eyes narrow for a moment. Segs clearly isn’t listening, already making eyes at a cluster of what look like freshman girls down the hall.

“Oh, lose the C already.” Marchy gives Patrice a good nudge in the shoulder, and starts off after Segs. “Let’s go drink these rich fuckers’ fancy beer.”

Patrice is pretty sure half the school is crammed into this one res hall. He even sees a couple guys he recognizes from MTL, and one or two of the seniors from Edmonton Municipal lurking around.

This is weird. It’s kind of fucking weird, being here and not being invited, even though Segs and Marchy and Davy seem to have no qualms about inserting themselves right into the bouncing crowd.

Then again, they aren’t secretly dating a dude who goes here -- that he’s aware of, anyway -- and who’s probably tearing it up with his boys somewhere very nearby, assuming they’re home licking their proverbial wounds after the loss like they said they’d be.

Like he’d said he’d be.

Yeah, maybe he should’ve texted Geno about this while Segs was cramming his shit into Marchy’s
car.

He hunkers down behind an ornamental ficus in the floor’s common area, pulling out his phone and opening a text to Geno before staring at the screen blankly until it goes dark again.

He turns the screen back on again and is halfway through typing what he figures to be the simplest, most direct approach to things *(hey so funny story i’m in consol res hall d on the second floor by the couches pls come find me)*, when suddenly there’s a firmly planted hand on his ass and a voice whispers in his ear, “Boo.”

He does not scream.

He definitely doesn’t drop his phone in the ficus pot.

Geno’s grinning, big and devious and amused, and Patrice has fleeting thoughts of trying to crawl into the plant pot after his phone and staying there.

“Hey,” he says instead, weakly. “I was just texting you to see where you were. We uh. I mean, me and some other guys. We sorta gatecrashed. ...Obviously.”

“I know,” Geno laughs, slipping an arm around Patrice’s waist and leaning into him a little in the safety of their semi-private corner. “Duper said he see douchey loud one hitting on Nealer’s girlfriend. Figure you be here, too, somewhere.”

“Segs,” Patrice groans, thunking his head against the wall. “Oh my god, I should go find him before he gets himself killed.”

Geno grabs his wrists firmly before he can go anywhere, though, still grinning. “No, no. He fine. She just laugh, tell him she don’t do JV boys.”

Patrice chokes. “Holy shit.”

“Yep,” Geno agrees, his accent drawing out the word and making Patrice giggle a little in spite of himself. “So I come find you, and here you are! I see and I think, ‘I recognize that ass anywhere’.” Patrice swats at him with an indignant snort, and Geno amends, “I mean those pants, I recognize. You only boy I know can pull off pink jeans, Prince Patrice.”

“God, you’re gross,” Patrice groans, but he leans into the lazy sling of Geno’s arm gratefully. It’s been a long day and it was a long fucking game. “Hey, uh. Is there anywhere quieter around here, where we could sit or something? I’m kinda wiped, man.”

Geno’s eyebrows do some interesting acrobatics across his forehead, mouth quirking.

“You want to get me alone?”

Patrice shoves him.

“Stop it,” he whines. “I’m serious, I’ve been going non-stop since like five this morning and you guys kicked our asses and all I want is to sit on something that isn’t a floor and maybe drink something that isn’t a Coors Light. Can we make that happen? Please?”

“Your wish my command, Prince Patrice.” Geno makes a show of raising Patrice’s hand to brush lips over the ridge of his knuckles, while Patrice glances around wildly to make sure nobody’s actually paying attention. They aren’t. “Come, you follow.”
They wend their way through clusters of people, Geno waving or responding to shouted greetings here and there as Patrice does his best to blend into the scenery each time.

“Wait here,” Geno tells him when they make it to the main landing, and ducks into the corner room. He reappears a moment later with a sixer of High Life, jiggling it in Patrice’s direction. “This okay?”

“How’s this okay?” Patrice shrugs, and lets Geno guide him up the winding flight of stairs leading off the landing to the top floor.

It’s mercifully quiet up here, most of the partiers seemingly preferring to congregate down near the common area, and the rooms all appear to be singles. Geno curls his hand around Patrice’s, lacing their fingers and tugging him toward the last door on the right. There’s a handwritten name card on the door slapped haphazardly over the official one bearing the school logo. It reads FLOWER, messily, and in what looks like black wedge-tip sharpie. Geno knocks once and then pushes the door open.

“This is Fleury’s room?” Patrice asks. He isn’t really sure what to expect, but once Geno flicks the light switch on, it seems pretty nondescript. Messy, like maybe a routine tornado blows through once a day or so.

“Yeah,” Geno says, picking his way through the piles of clothes and shoes on the floor to settle on the unmade bed, patting the mattress next to him. He produces a bottle opener from his pocket and opens two beers, handing one over as Patrice sinks down beside him. “Is safe. He never cleans, so won’t notice if room doesn’t look exactly same when we leave.”

Patrice drains about a third of his beer in one go and then flops over against Geno’s side. “You do this a lot?”

“I-- No!” Geno splutters, backpedaling. “I mean. Well, yes, maybe couple times, before you and me, I mean.” He trails off helplessly as Patrice laughs, tilting his chin up to catch Geno’s mouth with his own.

“Dude, breathe,” he says, still pressed against Geno’s lips. “I was just teasing, it’s not a big deal.”

Geno makes an incoherent grumbling noise, but just kisses Patrice again.

They make out lazily for a while, making slow progress on the beer and eventually ending up curled on top of the sheets with Patrice as the little spoon and Geno mouthing warmly down the curve of his neck. It’s the most relaxed Patrice has felt since waking up this morning, and he basks in the comfortable familiarity of it, like it’s not some oblivious goalie’s bed, and they do this all the time.

He sighs, stretches, and arches back a bit against Geno, who offers a little grind of his hips in response. Nothing too urgent, just a kind of companionable update on how fucking hard he is.

Suddenly, Patrice isn’t very tired anymore.

He hitches his ass back again, more insistent this time, and Geno lets out a little moan.

“You want...?” he asks, a little tentative, and it’s super sweet and all that he’d be so considerate, but fuck that.

“Yeah,” Patrice says, already a little breathless. “Yeah, yeah.”

He reaches back and finds Geno’s hand, guiding it purposefully down over where his own hard-on is rapidly making him regret the tightness of his jeans.
To his favor, Geno gets with the program remarkably fast. He’s got Patrice’s fly open and a hand down the front of his underwear before Patrice really has time to process, jerking him fully hard with quick, deft strokes. Then he slows, matching the rolling, steady rhythm of his own hips, drawn up tight against Patrice’s ass.

It’s good. It’s so, so good, and Patrice can’t help it when he starts thinking about what this might be like under different circumstances. Circumstances involving lube and condoms and a less compromised location.

And wow, that’s a thought.

“Come here,” he says, craning his head around until all Geno has to do is lean up on his elbow to kiss him, messy and wet and hungry.

When they break apart, he buries his face back in the crook of Patrice’s neck, hips stuttering and hand losing a little of its steady rhythm.

“Glad you show up,” he mumbles, barely intelligible, and Patrice laughs breathlessly.

“Yeah, me too,” he says, and then moans when Geno’s thumb rubs over the head of his dick, smearing precome and making everything is a little slicker for a couple strokes. He feels rather than sees Geno’s answering grin, curving warm and soft just behind his ear as he does it again, making Patrice squirm in the circle of Geno’s arms.

After that, it’s only a moment or two later before Geno’s coming, panting, “Fuck, fuck, yes,” in Patrice’s ear, while the hand on Patrice’s dick goes briefly, frustratingly still.

Patrice gives him a second before reaching down and lacing their fingers together over his dick, and Geno takes the hint, jacking him off in quick strokes until Patrice is shaking apart with it. Bucking up shamelessly into Geno’s grasp and coming with a stifled groan he muffles into the pillow.

Geno’s lips are on his neck again by the time he comes back to himself, body still tingling head to foot in a pleasant, boneless sort of way. He’s back to feeling dead-tired, but at least now all the frustration and anxiety seems to have bled out of him.

“No falling asleep,” Geno warns, and gives his hip an insistent little shake. “Unless you want to wake up to drunk, scarred for life goalie.”

“Urrgh,” Patrice groans, still not opening his eyes. “No, no, this could be good. It could increase my scoring chances if he’s too traumatized to concentrate when we play you guys.”

Geno snorts a laugh. “That only work if you actually shoot puck at net,” he says. Patrice snorts indignantly. “Pass me box of tissues.”

There is, in fact, a conveniently placed box of Kleenex on the table beside the bed, and Patrice makes sure to whack Geno in the arm with it as he passes it over. “I only shot wide one time, you asshole, oh my god,” he grumbles, but takes the wad of tissues Geno passes him and does his best cleaning up the mess in his pants.

Geno just smirks as he tosses the crumpled tissues into the garbage, and jostles the can around until they’re less obvious. “Is fine,” he assures Patrice kindly, as Patrice glares. “Another game at end of month. Another chance for you to learn lesson.”

“Ugh,” Patrice groans. “Remind me never to hang out with you after Consol wins.”
He leans in, though, when Geno moves forward for a kiss, and hums contentedly as Geno’s fingers stroke soothingly through his hair. Everything is great until he catches sight of the radio alarm clock on Fleury’s desk, reading 1:49AM.

“Fuck,” he gasps, breaking the kiss and fumbling for his phone. “I completely forgot to turn my ringer back on after the game.”

Sure enough there’s a whole pile of messages in his inbox, boiling down to where the everliving fuck did you go???

Geno frowns, trying to read over his shoulder. “Everything okay?”

Mercifully, the texts seem to have only started about twenty five minutes ago. “Yeah,” he says, firing off a quick shit sorry ringer was off where r u guys?. “But I think I have to go. Ty’s been trying to find me, I think they want to head out.”

He gives Geno an apologetic smile, and Geno drops a quick kiss onto the tip of his nose. “Is fine,” he assures Patrice. “Glad you show up.”

“Me, too.” Patrice’s phone blinks with a new message, second floor by couches where the fuck r u???, and at least he knows where that is, roughly. “Shit,” he sighs. “Yeah, they’re leaving. I gotta go.”

“See you after soccer tomorrow?” Geno asks, and Patrice is having a stupidly hard time letting go of his hand. “I finish at restaurant at three, can bring sandwiches.”

“I’m not sure what my parents are doing, but I’ll text you, ‘kay?” Patrice says.


That seems like a moot point by the time Patrice gets back downstairs, as nearly everyone appears to be too drunk to suspect much of anything at all.

True to his word, Segs is lounging against the wall with Marchy and Davy, almost exactly where Patrice had been when Geno found him.

“There you are!” Segs yells, getting right up into his space and inspecting him, as if to make sure he hadn’t been harmed by the enemy.

Patrice is mostly sure he doesn’t have any visible hickeys. Crap.

Segs seems appeased, though, and immediately begins herding Patrice back toward the door they came in, the other guys following in their wake.

“Where the fuck did you disappear to?” he asks. He’s definitely a few beers in, and Marchy appears to be using the wall to hold himself up.

“Oh, uh.” Shit, he hadn’t even thought of excuses until now. “I just. There was an empty room and I. Um. Fell asleep.” He doesn’t grimace, but it’s a near thing.

Luckily, Segs doesn’t seem to be in much of a state to question him further. He just laughs, “Oh my god, see? You are boring!” and holds the door open so Davy can help Marchy out onto the top step.

“Shut up,” Patrice rolls his eyes. “And what happened to Marchy? Who’s gonna drive his car?”
“I’m fine,” Marchy insists, though the words all kind of slur together and he clings precariously to the railing with one arm, Krejci with the other. “That long-haired fucker. Letang. He said-- and then I--” he gestures vaguely with the hand holding the railing, and nearly overbalances before Davy catches him.

“Drinking contest,” Segs clarifies gleefully, and Marchy nods.

“Yeah, that.”

“And he won,” Davy says proudly.

Segs snickers. “Yup. Letang was in the bathroom puking his guts out after the ninth shot. Fucking lightweight.”

“Please don’t talk about-- about that,” Marchy begs, and teeters a little on the stairs until Davy steadies him again, looking distinctly unsettled suddenly about being within blast radius.

“I said I’d drive his car back,” Davy adds. “Crash on his couch, and he’ll take me home when he sobers up.”

“Yep,” Marchy says, and then barfs into a hedge. Davy jumps out of range just in time.

They end up hanging out near the parking lot for awhile, waiting for Marchy to collect himself. Segs falls asleep in the back seat, while Patrice and Davy sit on the edge of the sidewalk hemming in the school parking lot.

“Sorry I lost you guys,” Patrice says, but Davy just shrugs.

“No worries.” He casts a glance at him that Patrice isn’t really sure how to interpret. “You must’ve had a good nap.”


Davy smirks. “Because I think you have a hickey on the back of your neck.”

“Oh god.” Patrice claps a hand up to the back of his neck, for all the good that’ll do now. “Shit, I mean--”

“Anybody we know?” Davy asks innocently.

“No,” Patrice says, maybe just a tick too fast, because Krejci’s eyebrows hike up his forehead. “But um. If you could not say anything to anyone else? That’d be awesome.” He stares pleadingly at Davy until he nods.

“Fine,” Davy assures him. “But if she has a hot friend, this means you introduce me first. Not these assholes.” He waves an arm vaguely to indicate Segs passed out and Marchy still presumably hurling his guts out into the weeds.

“Uh,” Patrice says. He glances down at his shoes, and then back toward the dorm with its bright windows and distant, emanating ruckus.

Somewhere in there, Geno’s probably rejoining his guys. His teammates. All of whom know he’s into dudes, and apparently aren’t flipping out about it. Patrice lets out a sigh.

“I mean, yeah, man. Definitely.”
February: Johnny

In warm weather, the round picnic tables and matching benches in Madison Tech black, red, and white are packed, friends coordinating amongst themselves who gets to go get food while everyone else stakes out the choice spots. In midwinter, however, it’s entirely, and understandably, deserted.

Johnny collects his lunch and slips outside, picking a table furthest from the cafeteria windows. It has a nice view overlooking the quad with its bare trees and low hedgerow separating school grounds from public sidewalk, and, even better, is entirely devoid of his ex making out with his ex’s new girlfriend. He’s got a good coat on, and it’s easy enough to ignore the chill and the sickly pale, low-slung clouds overhead in favor of watching cars and buses rumble by in between bites of roast beef.

He’s so preoccupied that he startles when someone clears their throat behind him, turning so abruptly that he nearly knocks the remainder of his lunch off the table.

“Hey, Cap,” says Crawford, sheepishly. He’s wearing a thick fleece and some aviators, and carrying an enormous toxic-blue Slurpee, car keys still hooked around his finger. “You, uh. You doing okay?”

Johnny just stares at him. Crow looks shifty.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

Crow shrugs once; sips his drink.

“Then no, I’m not,” Johnny says. He meets Crow’s gaze and adds, “Sorry.”

“For what?” Crawford snorts. He sets his Slurpee on the table and plops down beside Johnny. “Being fucked up ‘cause you had a shitty breakup and now your ex is parading some chick around in front of you?” He raises his eyebrows significantly, sighing at the look of surprise on Johnny’s face. “Yeah, dude. I notice.”


Johnny looks at him dubiously and Crow rolls his eyes.

“It’s just blue raspberry. The vodka thing was only that once, jeez.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about that,” Johnny lies, taking a sip before handing it back.

Crow just smiles, leaning back and looking up at the bright, chilly sky through his sunglasses. “What’re you doing after practice?”

“I dunno,” Johnny says. There’s a pebble wedged between two loose courtyard bricks, and he worries at it with his toe, trying to pry it free. “Go home. Do that thing for history we have due next week. Why?”

“Because fuck that, you should come out. Get out of this funk, Cap.” Crow reaches over and ruffles Johnny’s hair, even as he tries to squirm away. “C’mon, dude. That section summary isn’t due til next week, and you look like you need a distraction. Just for a little while, huh?”

Johnny tenses. “I don’t need to be babysat.”
“Oh, fuck you very much, did I say anything about babysitting?” Crow punches his arm hard enough that Johnny nearly slips off the bench sideways. “We haven’t really hung out since school started, we could just grab pizza or something. Cheer you up. You could think of it like I’m doing a public service for the team.”

Johnny looks at him, and Crow grins back with bright blue lips.

“Fine,” says Johnny. “I mean, cool. That’d be cool.” He tries to smile back, but it feels more like a grimace.

Crow nudges him in the arm again, but not nearly so hard this time. “Good choice,” he says.

The last warning bell sounds, and they collect their stuff and head in, back to the warmth and noise and crush of people all milling towards their various classrooms.

Johnny knows better than to think Crow would invite him just out of pity or something. He does. But it’s still revoltingly reassuring when Crow thunks down next to Johnny after practice to take off his gear, grinning like an excited little kid when he asks, “Hey man, we still on for tonight?”

“Yeah,” Johnny tells him. “Just let me rinse off and I’m good to go.”

“Sweet,” Crow beams, and then calls across the locker room, “Hey, Rayray! You got the Escalade, right?”

“Always, baby,” Emery calls back, and Crow whoops.

“Uh,” says Johnny. “Ray’s coming?”

“Yeah, that cool?”

Johnny gets his skates off and goes for his shinpads, shrugging. “Sure, man. As long as I’m home by eleven.”

He looks up in time to see Pat across the locker room, glancing away quickly to avoid Johnny’s eyes. Something in the pit of Johnny’s stomach squirms and he distracts himself by tugging his skates off.

From the next bench over, Shaw says hopefully, “Hey, you guys are going out?”

“Yup,” says Emery. “Captain and goalies, only. Sorry, little dude.”

He doesn’t look sorry, though, grinning wickedly as he pats Shaw’s head on his way over to stuff his pads into their cubby.

“Douche,” mutters Shaw.

Next to him, Leddy says, “Don’t you and Brandon have a study session thing?” and Johnny sticks around long enough to watch Shaw’s ears go pink before he heads off to the showers.

Crow is already dressed and hanging out with Ray by his stall when Johnny comes back out, feet kicking idly against the floor.

“Ready?” he asks, and Johnny nods, following them out to the waiting Escalade.

He’s not remotely surprised when Ray slides the little baggie of weed out of the low pocket of his jeans, handing it over to Crawford in the passenger seat.
Crow’s hands work easily, packing the one-hitter even though they’re still in full view of the school.

Ray meets Johnny’s eyes in the rearview and smiles, slow and easy.

“Relax, Cap,” he says, reversing out of his spot against the fence and peeling out of the parking lot. “We’re cool.”

Johnny definitely doesn’t flinch, and doesn’t reach for the safety handle either. He just leans back against the padded bench and breathes deeply. Crow winks at him from the passenger seat, taking a long, slow drag and leaning back to hand it off. Johnny hesitates a second, and then accepts.

“Way to walk on the wild side,” Crow says wryly, but his grin is big and bright. Johnny swallows, just managing not to cough as he hands the pipe back, leaning his head back against the seat again.

It hits him hard, but he accepts the second round Crow passes back to him, and then the third. He hasn’t smoked in about year, and it settles heavy in his bones, pulling him down until he’s a little dizzy from it. The moving vehicle doesn’t really help.

It feels like they’re driving for half an hour at least, and time passes slow through tinted windows and the chemical calm.

“You think we broke him?” he hears Ray ask Crow, and he means to look up, means to sit up straighter and make some smart comment about Ray’s driving, or maybe protest the questionable choice of Pizza Express as the glowing sign comes into view, but his tongue is too thick and sluggish.

Ray’s saying something as he parks, but Johnny can’t really hear him over the rumble of the engine. The leather is soft against his cheek, and he’s just closing his eyes when the door opens, a burst of bright sunlight forcing him to squint.

“Hey there,” Ray says, grinning big and wide and lazy. “Weird self-imposed nutrition plans don’t count when you’re wallowing. C’mon. Pizza’s on me, and then you’re gonna sit real quiet and pretend you’re 18 while I get some new ink.”

Crow’s reaching in, unsnapping Johnny’s seatbelt, and Johnny flinches when Crow’s fingers brush against his belly. He meets Johnny’s eyes with a smirk.

“Um,” Johnny says, voice weird and distant in his ears. His lips feel rubbery, and he hangs back as they walk toward the entrance to the restaurant to rub the back of his hand against his mouth.

Down the strip of shops is a laundromat, vent belching warm, chemical-clean dryer smell into the chilly air. It hits him like a wave, sudden, vivid memories of Saturday afternoons spent at Pat’s house, helping his mom do laundry. The fabric softener had smelled just like this, and Pat was always on his case about folding the shirts wrong.

Fuck.

“Fuck,” he says, and Ray turns to look at him.

“C’mon, Captain Slowpoke,” he says, doubling back to drag Johnny along with him. “Greasy carbs and then tattoos and then drinking in my stepdad’s library.”

The last thing Johnny says before he gets a slice of pepperoni stuffed in his face is, “Wait, your step dad has his own library?”
Nobody responds, and Johnny forgets the question entirely in favor of eating. It’s very possibly the best thing he’s ever tasted, and he doesn’t even think twice about going for more.

“This is amazing,” he says after his third slice. Crow and Ray are talking about maybe ordering a second pizza. “But I’m gonna puke if I eat more cheese, seriously.”

“Seriously,” Crow mimics, giggling and leaning hard against Johnny’s shoulder like that’ll take the sting out of it. Ray’s sidling up to the counter, refusing to take Johnny’s money when he tries to reach for his wallet.

It’s somehow unsurprising that the tattoo shop is in the same strip mall as the pizza place. Ray and Crow steer him past the laundromat and into a little storefront that has a low hanging sign reading REDEMPTION in bolded black lettering.

“Here?” Johnny asks, trying his best to sound inquisitive, and not as much like a judgmental dick. The food’s done a lot to dull the high, but he’s still feeling a little dumb.

Ray just laughs at him. “Yeah, here. These are good people, man. They’ve done all my work.”

Crow’s laughing quietly. He reaches out, poking Johnny’s cheek where it’s all hot and prickly, and Johnny glares straight ahead, sliding low in his seat as Ray’s name gets called.

The girl waving him in is slim, with a labret piercing and bright pink hair piled in a huge bun on top of her head. She’s pretty, objectively pretty, and Johnny rolls his head so that it’s half against the scratchy material of the chair and half on Crow’s shoulder, considering.

“She’s pretty,” he says.

Crow just hums, his shoulder jostling as he pats Johnny’s knee.

“I guess so,” he agrees. When Johnny peeks at him, his eyes are closed. “You gonna try and get back at Kane by dating a girl, too?”

Johnny’s new to the whole breakup gig; he keeps assuming it’ll eventually fade out, that the sting will subside, but the whole process is inconveniently slow. He’s learning that. It's absurd that even so, he still forgets sometimes, that he won't look at his phone and find a text from Pat. Won't get to hang out with him at lunch, or sneak off together during class, or joke with him in the dressing room, or hear another endless anecdote about something dumb one of his sisters did.

Johnny’s stomach dips and he grits his teeth.

“No,” he says, because it’s not like that, and he wouldn’t date some girl just to hurt Pat. Even if he thought it’d work.

“Good,” Crow says, patting at Johnny’s thigh again and humming along with the whatever Top 40 crap is playing on the overhead speaker.

They’re both quiet for a minute, soaking in the pervasive buzz of tattoo needles emanating from behind curtained cubicles, and the thick, heavy smell of ink. Finally, Crow says, “If you really want to get back at him, you should get something pierced.”

“What? Ugh, no way,” Johnny chokes, while under his cheek Crawford’s shoulder is shaking with silent laughter. “Douche.”

“Oh, I dunno,” Crawford says conversationally. “Pierced nipples would really make things
interesting next time we’re all getting dressed for a game.”

When Ray reemerges a minute or two later, Crow is curled in on himself giggling while Johnny tries to pummel any part of him he can reach.

“Wow,” he says. Johnny quickly sits up straight, which just makes Crow laugh harder. “I’m about set here, so if you yahoos wanna go wait in the car, I’ll be right out.”

“I think we’re embarrassing him,” Crow stage-whispers to Johnny, but grabs the keys Ray hands him and stands up. Johnny follows him out, still snickering.

When Ray slides into the driver’s seat a couple minutes later, Johnny can see the corner of something slick and plasticky sticking out the neck of his shirt. Crow notices it, too, and he leans over, unceremoniously tugging at it.

“Ooh,” he says, reaching out a finger to poke at the edge of the tape where it stands out against Ray’s dark skin. “Is that it? What’d you get?”

Ray swats at his hand. “Ow, motherfucker! Careful. Here,” he leans forward so Johnny can carefully peel back the tape and plastic covering.


Ray punches him in the leg. “Shut up, asshole. It has meaning and shit.”

“Yeah?” Crow asks interestedly. “What’s it mean?”

“It means none of your fucking business,” says Ray composedly. “Now cover it up before it gets all crusty.”

“Did it hurt?” Johnny asks, leaning up to accept the lit hitter from Crow again as they leave the parking lot.

“Eh,” Ray shrugs. “Kinda stings, but not as bad as that shit on my ribs.”

This time, the high is thick and slow, and Johnny imagines it creeping through him like warm molasses. He leans his cheek against the cold window and watches things pass: houses, trees, other cars. He closes his eyes against the flickering glare of the late afternoon sun flashing off chrome and glass, and the next thing he knows is Crow’s hand on his shoulder, jostling him back to consciousness.

“Hey,” Crow says quietly, “you cool, dude?”

Johnny nods, scrubbing hands over his face and trying to will himself back awake. “Uhuh. Just tired. Haven’t been sleeping a whole lot.”

Crawford gives him a concerned frown, but lets it drop. “C’mon in. Rayray said his mom and stepdad are out super late tonight, so we can raid the bar and party a little bit before you turn into a pumpkin.”

The best term to describe Ray’s house is “opulent”. There’s a gaudy chandelier in the foyer where they kick their shoes off, and all the furniture has the distinct air of being artfully staged. Johnny follows them both down a plush-carpeted hallway into what Ray announces as, “Gentlemen, the library,” with a sweeping gesture of his arm.
It looks more like a study to Johnny, with a few high bookshelves and a heavy computer desk off in one corner made out of some dark, expensive-looking wood. There’s a fireplace set into the far wall, surrounded by a cluster of leather sofas, and Ray turns a knob and lights a match and just like that they’ve got a fire going.

Crow flops back on one of the sofas and pats the seat next to him for Johnny to sit, too, and Ray says, “Okay, who wants what?”

“Anything that isn’t rum,” says Crow. “Uh, tequila? The good kind?”

“That’ll work,” says Johnny. He leans back and the cushions seem to pull him in, leather creaking pleasantly.

Ray is back a minute later with a mostly-full bottle of Patron.

“Damn,” says Johnny. “Your parents won’t miss that?”

Crow and Ray both laugh as Crow pops the stopper and takes a swig.

“He refills it with Cuervo from a stash under his bed.”

Ray grins, taking the bottle from Crawford. “The haven’t noticed yet.”

Johnny raises the bottle in mock toast and takes a gulp. It’s nearly tasteless, but burns pleasantly all the way down, and he chases the first swallow with a second before passing it off again.

He’s getting nicely buzzed, the booze adding to the weighted calm already heavy in his bones. He’s not sure how long it’s been when Crow starts poking at his leg.

“Sorry, uh,” he tries, while Crow just smirks and pets his hair. “What was that?”

“You want dinner?” Crow asks, leaning in close. The feel of his breath makes goose pimples spread across Johnny’s neck where his skin is exposed, and the fingers in his hair feel nice. “Ray’s making sandwiches. Grilled cheese.”

“He can make grilled cheese from the couch?” Johnny asks, but when he turns his head to look, Ray’s not on the couch anymore. The bottle of Patron is mostly empty, strewn haphazardly on the floor by the foot of one of the fancy leather armchairs.

Johnny moves a little too fast, he must, because when he turns back again, the room tilts a little and he’s craning forward, nearly collapsing into Crow’s shoulder instead of back in his own space.

“Hey there, lightweight,” Crow says, and his stroking fingers move to the nape of Johnny’s neck, the rough pads scraping against the bare skin there and making him shiver. “Cold?”

Johnny shakes his head, even though he still hasn’t moved it, and says, “Tickles, but,” he yawns, and then breathes deep. “s’nice.”

Crow laughs, but he keeps it up. Johnny isn’t sure if he’s asleep or just zoning out when Ray comes back in, but a delicious smelling grilled cheese gets shoved at him a minute later, and he moves away to eat because suddenly his stomach feels like a bottomless pit of emptiness.

“This is amazing,” he says between bites. “How is this the best thing I have ever tasted?”

This makes Ray laugh so hard he slides down from his perch on the other couch, and just ends up on the floor, paper plate settled on his lap as he giggles.
“Toews, man,” he says, turning his head so that Johnny gets the full force of his smile. “You’re a fucking riot when you’re high.”

Next to him, Crow snorts, but he just says, “Leave him alone, Rayray. He’s heartbroken.”

Johnny winces, and the sandwich suddenly doesn’t taste all that amazing. It feels like his center of gravity is even lower, like being pulled down even closer to the ground.

“I’m not heartbroken,” he says, even though his words sound sticky and run together. “Pat doesn’t think I actually loved him, so. Not much heart to break, right?”

Ray looks over, meeting Johnny’s eyes again. He doesn’t look nearly as wasted as he should, considering.

“That,” he says. “Johnny T, that is some prime, Grade A bullshit.”

Johnny flinches, throat going dry.

“I don’t -- I mean. I do love him. Loved him. There was just. I didn’t mean to let it get so far, you know? How do you go from being with someone to just -- and whenever I talk to him, I just get.”

He’s speaking fast, words slipping together in a rush, which is embarrassing, but not nearly as embarrassing as the fact that when he blinks, his eyes are wet.

Ray leans up from his position on the floor and squeezes his shoulder gently.

“I wasn’t talking about you, man,” he says, sitting back. “Kane’s okay. He’ll get his head out of his ass eventually, probably. That girl is way too good for him.”

“Hey,” Johnny says, voice tight. “She’s not. He’s a good kid.”

He slips down further on the couch, discarding the remnants of his sandwich on the end table next to them. With his head resting on Crow’s thigh, Johnny can feel his laugh start to rumble, even if he can’t entirely hear the sound.

“You,” Crawford says, fingers resuming their steadying strokes down the back of Johnny’s neck. “You don’t have to defend him to us. We like Kane just fine. He’s just being a dickbag right now.”

“Giiiiiiiiiiiiiiant bag of dicks,” Ray agrees solemnly, tugging a joint from out of his pocket and lighting it easily in the fireplace. “He’s young and stupid,” he says on the exhale, handing the blunt over to Crow before laying down on the thick carpet, arms pillowed behind his head. “He’ll get better.”

“And so will you,” Crow says, looking down at Johnny and grinning as he breathes the smoke out. He takes another pull on the joint, and leans down.

Johnny’s already moving up to meet him, sucking in the smoke as it rolls from Crow’s lips until there’s nothing left. He’s suddenly, vividly aware of only the hot, damp press of Crow’s lips against his. He lets himself fall back.

From the floor, Ray snickers, and Johnny can feel Ray watching as he swipes the joint from Crow, sucking in a lungful and then leaning back up to shotgun it into Crow’s mouth. He hesitates just a second, just long enough to give Crow time to pull back if he wants to, but he doesn’t. This time it ends with Crow’s tongue in his mouth, and his hands back in Johnny’s hair.

“Puff or pass,” says Ray after a minute, and Johnny sits back to hand off what’s left of the joint.
The high has changed, and now instead of feeling like he’s moving in slow motion, it’s like everything else is slowed down and he’s whooshing *fastfastquick*. He waves his hand around in front of his face, and he’s pretty sure he can feel the air flowing past it like a slipstream.

“I think I can like, feel the air,” he announces. And then, “Wait, does that make sense?”

Crow laughs, muffled where he’s got his face pressed into Johnny’s shoulder. Ray says, “Stick a fork in him, I think the Cap’s done,” and Crow just laughs harder. Johnny tries to bite him, but he can only reach the top of Crow’s head, where his hair is fluffed up and stupid in all directions.

Johnny’s mostly sobered up when they drop him off at home a couple hours later, but he’s still infinitely relieved that his parents’ bedroom light is off. He locks the front door and shuts off the porch light, sneaking up the stairs and just managing to brush his teeth and tug his pants off before falling into bed, boneless, exhausted, but somehow a little bit lighter.
March: Geno

It’s the longest, stupidest week in history, and for once, Geno wishes he could slack off like some of the other guys. Not bother to show up for the so-called optional practices, and not get conscripted into nursing the cadre of nervous underclassmen through pre-playoff conditioning.

“Dude, you want me to take it from here?” Sid asks, leaning in so their helmets clunk awkwardly together. Even so, Geno can barely hear him under the scrape and clatter of JV guys skating a four-corners drill around them. “You look all, like…”

He waves a gloved hand, vaguely.

Sadly, or maybe lucky, for Sid, Geno doesn’t feel like clarifying the whole the last time I touched my boyfriend was almost two weeks ago because between midterms and playoffs coming up, and my job, and his ten million extracurriculars, we haven’t even had time to see each other, or for me even to jerk off thinking about seeing him, and I’m sorry I’m not responsible enough not to let the biggest case of blue balls in history interrupt my hockey career, please just let me die situation.

...It’s definitely lucky for Sid.

Sid, who is still watching him with that politely concerned sidelong look, as sweat drips off the tip of his nose.

“I’m fine,” Geno says, unconvincingly. “Just tired. Too much study, soon head too full, too big to fit in helmet.”

Sid laughs, elbowing him with a commiserating nod. “Shit, tell me about it. AP calc is killing me. I was up until like, 3am, trying to make sense of the notes I took last semester.”

Down ice, Coach blows three quick blasts of the whistle, and Geno and Sid follow the sweating, huffing JV group over to meet him by the benches.

“At least torturing the kids make us feel better,” Geno says, and beams when Maatta casts a baleful look over his shoulder.

“Torturing them is one thing,” says Sid, “but isn’t the point to fill our empty roster slots? That’s going to be difficult if you kill them all with endurance testing a month before we even start playoffs.”

“No, no,” Geno waves him off. “I’m hockey Darwin. This natural selection, you see. Strong ones survive, we take them.”

Sid smirks. “At least you’ll probably pass Biology.”

Geno pulls out his phone once they’re in the room, stripped down to his lower-body gear and getting distracted midway through unlacing his skates by texts waiting for him from Patrice.

If Krug spent half the time doing his homework that he spends harassing me, he might actually be passing his classes AND THEN I WOULDN’T BE STUCK HERE TUTORING HIS DUMB ASS.

Seriously, will you come visit me in prison? He’s gonna die.

Geno hides a grin and thumbs back, You have enough orange pants. I break you out.
He figures Patrice is still busy with tutoring, so he’s surprised when his phone buzzes a few minutes later. It’s just a string of kissy-face smileys, but he laughs before he can think to stifle it, and glances up just in time to see Sid darting his eyes away, back to his own skate laces.

“What?” Geno asks defensively, putting the phone down and returning attention to his gear.

Sid smirks. “Nothing.”

And that’s the great thing about Sid. He doesn’t ask. Or, okay, sometimes that drives Geno sort of crazy, because if he ever needs to talk about stuff, he’s got to be the one to bring it up. He could be wearing a neon sign on his head, and Sid will still defer to neutral silence until Geno actually brings up whatever’s bugging him. Right now, Geno adores him for it.

He knows he hasn’t exactly been subtle, and he’s pretty sure that if the whole gay thing wasn’t a factor he’d already be taking endless shit from the guys about all the dopey mooning he’s been doing at his cellphone screen lately. Maybe under different circumstances that would bug him, but he just...he’s not ready to share Patrice, yet.

Geno isn’t even really sure what that means, except for how every time he considers it, thinks about asking Patrice to come out with him and his guys, or maybe he’d just stop bothering to even pretend being subtle about texting and sneaking off for dates, he stalls out. He’s attached to their safe, insular little bubble. The heady feeling of being accountable only for each other, and not all the external crap that always seems to pile up the second friends and teammates and third-party opinions get involved.

His phone buzzes again, this time with, Fine, I'll let him live. But only because we need him for playoffs.

“Hey, I gotta get up to the dining hall if I’m going to beat the crowd for dinner.” Sid is standing up, fully dressed and cramming the last of his gear into its cubby. “I’ll see you tomorrow, second period?”

“Yeah,” says Geno, dropping the phone again and hurrying to get the rest of his own stuff together. “You wanna go off campus for lunch tomorrow? I treat. Think you maybe getting sick of mystery meat?”

Consol’s school lunch is restaurant-quality and they both know it, but Sid just beams and says, “Sure, thanks.”

Because, again, Sid is fucking great, so long as you don’t ever want to talk about your feelings.

Geno’s phone rings when he’s unlocking the Camry, juggling gear bag and water bottle and a stack of books, so he nearly misses the call. He’s expecting Denis, maybe, or his mom, but the caller ID reads PB. It’s relatively un-stealthy, as code-names go.

Geno’s heart does a dumb, swoopy thing.

“Oh,” says Patrice, when Geno answers. “I didn’t actually think you’d pick up.”

“Then why you call me?” Geno asks, laughing. He turns on the engine, idling in the mostly deserted parking lot, and cranks the heat before he can start to get cold in the damp base-layer he didn’t bother changing out of.

Patrice laughs, and even through the tinny little speaker, Geno feels it down to his core. Loosening tension he didn’t even know was there. “I dunno, I guess I’m an optimist today. What’s up?”
“Not lots,” Geno says, slouching back in the driver’s seat and picking idly at a fraying patch on the steering wheel with his free hand. “Just finish practice with JV kids.”

“Ugh,” says Patrice, sympathetically. “You guys still trying to fill those open slots?”

“Yup,” Geno says. “But I think Coach put list up by tomorrow, then everybody calm down.”

“Good,” says Patrice. “Good.” He sounds kind of distracted, and Geno is about to ask, but then Patrice asks, “Hey, so what are you doing tonight?”

“Tonight?” Geno repeats. He glances at the dash clock, which reads 6:28pm.

Seemingly reading his mind, Patrice amends, “I mean, right now. Are you busy?”

Geno is exhausted. He’s been up since four-thirty in the morning, followed his mom into work for breakfast prep before classes started, had a full day of finals study, and then extra-long hockey practice. He hasn’t showered, hasn’t eaten since the protein bar after last bell, and he’s got four papers due by the end of the week that he hasn’t even thought about.

“No,” he says. “Not busy right now if you not busy.”

“I’m not busy at all,” Patrice says. Geno can hear the smile in his voice. The small, sweet, private one that just barely turns up the corners of his lips; the one that lives in the crinkles around his eyes, that Geno can feel even here, miles away, seeping through him like sunlight. “And my parents are at a parent-teacher conference tonight until, like, eleven.”

“Give me forty minutes,” Geno says. “Unless I go home and shower first. Then maybe more like an hour.”

“Oh, dude, like I fucking care,” says Patrice, giggling. “You’re hot when you’re all sweaty from skating. I’m sorta into it.”

“Dating other hockey player make so much sense,” Geno says, glad he’s safely sequestered in his car. His guys have been nice enough to pretend they don’t see the dopey mooning, but he’s pretty sure they wouldn’t be able to ignore this dumb, huge grin splitting his face. “Don’t know why I don’t think of it sooner.”

“Hey!” Patrice says. “That’s not funny.”

“Not trying to be funny, just making sense,” Geno says, primly, earning himself an indignant huff from Patrice.

“Okay, great. Well will you get your smart ass over here? We can order pizza or something, if you haven’t eaten. My mom left some money for it.”

Geno switches over to speakerphone and pulls out of the lot, heading for the main highway. “Mama’s restaurant on the way,” he says. “You want Russian food?”

“Oooh, yes!” Patrice says, enthusiastically. “Piroshki? Or pelmeni. Which ones are the boiled thingies in the soup?”

“Pelmeni,” Geno says, and Patrice makes another enthusiastic noise. “Mama say she making pork and onion pelmeni today. Always make extra, so I bring lots for you.”

“Best boyfriend,” Patrice says. Geno feels like he might start glowing. “Okay, I’ll see you soon,
then.”

“See you soon,” Geno agrees.

His mother is long gone for the day at the restaurant, thank goodness, and Tanya behind the deli counter doesn’t question him when Geno asks about extra pelmeni. From there, it’s only fifteen minutes to Patrice’s, and Geno does it in twelve, practically screeching to a halt in his usual spot halfway down the block.

“Hi,” Patrice says, opening the door before Geno can even ring the bell. On the phone he’d sounded almost punchy, but in person there’s a sort of tension behind his smile that Geno hadn’t been expecting.

“Hi,” Geno says back, and smiles in what he hopes is a disarming sort of way, holding up the large paper bag of dinner. “I hope you really hungry.”

“Yeah,” Patrice says. He’s still got that distracted note to his voice, even now, when he’s standing right in front of Geno. He takes the bag of food, backing up to let Geno in. “Totally. I’m starving.”

“You okay?” Geno asks, hesitating midway through toeing his shoes off in the entryway. He wants to take that bag of food out of Patrice’s hands and close the space between them and kiss him senseless. Get his full attention and feel the warm, responsive weight of him as he leans into Geno, the way Geno’s been craving for weeks now.

Patrice’s frowns. “Yeah, I’m fine. Why?”

Geno just laughs, leaning in to brush lips over the warm pink flush of Patrice’s cheek. “You look like that time saw you drink whole pot of coffee at diner,” he says. Then he adds, “Want to go put food down?”

“Oh, right! Sorry.” Patrice’s face gets even pinker, and he practically jumps out of the way, letting Geno lead him down the hall to the warmly lit kitchen.

Once there, though, Patrice just drops the bag of food onto the counter in favor of turning around and practically scaling Geno to kiss him. He actually steps on Geno’s toes a couple of times to get there, but Geno can’t find it in himself to care. He just wraps arms around Patrice and pulls him in tight, unable to help the happy noises that come out muffled against Patrice’s mouth, when Patrice’s arms curl around his neck.

“Hey,” Patrice mumbles into his mouth, “hey, hey, um.”

He chases Geno’s lips even while Geno’s pulling back to let him talk.

“Hey um?”

Patrice laughs nervously.

“Thank you,” he blurs, and Geno raises his eyebrows, questioning.


“No, no, I mean. I mean, yeah, thanks for dinner, too, but no. Like.” He laughs nervously. “What you told your guys a couple weeks ago. Thanks for that.”
“What I...Oh,” he says, stupidly, because suddenly his brain doesn’t seem to want to work. “You mean, what I tell them about me, liking boy.”

Patrice’s face goes bright and shy all at once and he ducks his head, dropping Geno’s gaze.

“Not sure what I was thinking,” Geno mutters, finally, but Patrice is already leaning up to press another kiss to his mouth; quick and punctuating, this time.

“I know you didn’t do it, like, for me,” Patrice says, but Geno just shakes his head.

“Did for me, did for you, did for guys, I think,” he says slowly. His hands find their way into Patrice’s back pockets.

Patrice smiles, and there it is. The quiet, upturned curl of his lips; the way he practically glows, with the crinkles deepening around his eyes. He says, “I just like that you did.”

“I like you,” Geno replies, and grins at the face Patrice makes.

“Oh my god, you’re so corny.” The last word ends in a yelp, as Geno lifts him with relative ease onto the counter. The bag of food gets shoved haphazardly aside as Patrice pushes forward into Geno’s space, hooking legs around the backs of his thighs and grabbing his face with both hands to pull him back in.

Geno’s mouth opens for him on reflex, but Patrice pushes for more, more, more, until they’re breathing each other’s air, his hands purposeful in Geno’s shirt like if he hangs on hard enough he can find a way to fit them in one skin.

“I want--” he starts, but it’s hard to talk when Geno is sucking on his lower lip. The rest of his sentence trails off as a moan into Geno’s mouth.

When they pull apart for air a moment later, Geno says, “You want..?”

Patrice stares at him a moment, dazed. “Oh,” he says quietly. “I want-- If you want to. Will you fuck me?”

The words hit Geno in waves, and he wants to ride the first one that crashes through him with a resounding YES, but then...

“I want.” Geno licks his lips, darting his gaze up to Patrice’s nervous expression. “Yes. But not yet. Not ready yet.”

He feels so genuinely sorry, some of it must bleed through in his voice, or his face, and while a part of him had been fully braced for whatever wounded backlash Patrice might throw at him, it doesn’t come. He’s all big, dark eyes and worried mouth that goes thin for a moment, sucking his lower lip.

“Fine,” he says, and he sounds like he means it. “No, no that’s fine, that’s totally fine.”

Geno’s initial flood of sick worry gets pushed back in favor of kissing him again; his mouth, his cheek, under his ear, until Patrice giggles and his arms are back around Geno’s shoulders.

And it is. It’s fine.

Right?

Geno tells himself right, it doesn’t matter, Patrice is still here, still hanging onto him, fingers tangled in Geno’s hair. He pushes back the thrumming nerves, the pervasive, desperate anticipation
consuming him like a flood, and smiles back. Something in the air around them settles.

“Dinner?” Geno says after a moment, still jangling with nerves. Patrice nods, and turns to dig some bowls out of the cupboard behind his head.

There’s pelmeni soup and dark rye bread. They serve themselves and Patrice trucks it all out to the living room on a tray so they can watch TV while they eat.

And okay, things are a little awkward for a minute or two. Geno casts a nervous glance over while Patrice is scrolling through for something to watch, but Patrice just smiles reassuringly at him. Eventually he settles on The Fifth Element playing on FX, and Geno nods his approval.

“Hey,” Patrice says, poking bits of bread around in his soup bowl. “Thanks for coming over. And for bringing the soup and stuff.”

Geno shrugs. “Thanks for being here, liking soup,” he says back, and grins until Patrice laughs and elbows him.

“Your mom makes the best pelmeni.”

“Mama Malkin makes best, yes,” Geno agrees. “Someday maybe you tell her yourself, she love you for it.”

Patrice grins shyly, cheeks going pink, and they watch the rest of the movie in relative silence. Patrice curls up against Geno’s side with his legs draped across his lap, and Geno’s arm lazily curled around his back. It’s nice and it’s comfortable and it doesn’t entirely drown out the nervous thrumming under Geno’s skin, but it helps.

He’s not even really sure why he backed out like that. It’s not like he’s unprepared for the idea of sex. Sex with Patrice, in particular. It’s practically all he can think about most days.

It’s something akin to his lingering resistance, telling anyone else about them. Something sweet in clinging to the beginnings of things, like he wants to draw out the craving; the anticipation. Is that selfish? Maybe it’s a little selfish, if Patrice wants it so bad, too.

Geno glances down to where Patrice is dozing, his head drooped on Geno’s shoulder, and drops a kiss on his temple. The corners of Patrice’s mouth curl up, and he sighs. Geno thinks, if we never have anything else, if there’s never anything past this moment, would I feel like we missed out?

Outside, a car door slams, and Patrice opens his eyes.

“Don’t worry about it,” he says reassuringly, taking in the look of panic on Geno’s face. “I got this.”

They’re sitting at opposite ends of the couch when his parents come in, TV hastily turned off. Patrice’s dad glances back and forth between them. “More English lessons?”

“Yep,” Patrice says, and smiles brightly.

Geno makes a quiet snorting noise, hopefully inaudible from the hallway. He says, “Yes, very helpful.”

“Alright.” Patrice’s dad shoots them an amused look that makes something in the pit of Geno’s stomach squirm.

Patrice’s mom says, “We’re going to have a snack and go to bed. You should, too, Patrice. It’s late.”
“Yeah,” he agrees, waving them off. “Uh, were the meetings okay?”

His dad laughs. “All your teachers suggests you leave yourself time to breathe, but yes, rave reviews as usual. We can talk about it tomorrow.”

“Sure,” Patrice agrees, and his dad gives one final nod and follows his mother off down the hall to the kitchen.


“Oh my god.” Patrice throws a pillow across the couch at him. “You shut up.”
I SUCK I SUCK I'M SORRY!!!

I started a new job on Monday and it is A Lot, so it wasn't until i was going to bed last night that I remembered OH SHIT. Sooooo expect an extra chapter this week as apology, and, uh. Yeah. Oops?

Shivering on the curb outside his house in the early hours of a Saturday morning, Patrice shifts the heavy box of books he’s carrying to his hip and holds the car door open for Marchy.

“This is indecent,” Marchy tells him, around a yawn that threatens to unhinge his jaw. “People aren’t meant to be awake this early unless they haven’t gone to bed yet from the night before.”

“Then why did you volunteer to help me with this, anyway?” Patrice asks, irritably. He picks up another box of books, hefting it in on top of the others.

“Because I never fucking see you anymore, man.” Marchy frowns, kicking at a frostbitten tuft of grass. “You’re always like, off doing fuck knows what. Tutoring and shit. Haven’t you saved up enough for like, six college educations by now? I miss you, dude! I miss our hangs, and our crazy sleepovers.”

“Sleepovers,” Patrice repeats, snorting. “You make it sound like we painted each other’s toes or something.”

“It’s still a sleepover if we spend it playing video games, you judgy fuck.”

Patrice pops the trunk, shifting things around to make room, so he can fit another of the boxes inside. “Semantics. Are you gonna help me at all, or did you just volunteer for this to stand around giving me shit all day?”

“Someone’s been studying for his SATs,” Marchy grumbles, but he tugs his sweats up where they’re dragging on the ground, and ducks into the garage behind them for a box. “What is this for, anyway?”


“No, yesterday you told me that you had to be up at ass o’clock this morning to run an errand for your mom, so if I wanted to stay over, I had to help,” Marchy grumbles. “It’s too fucking early for Saturday, and it’s freezing.”

“Which is why I told you to grab your coat on the way out.” Patrice rolls his eyes and grabs another box. “Maybe you’d be warmer if you had helped me drag all this crap out of the garage.”

Marchy ignores this. “Shit, it’s Saturday,” Marchy says again, as if just now realizing it. “Wait, why aren’t you doing your soccer thing with Captain Boring?”

“We’re on break from soccer until the third week of March,” Patrice says. “Maybe if you ever
bothered to get to know Johnny--"

“Whatever, dude,” Marchy cuts him off with an eyeroll. “Can we grab breakfast on the way back, or something? I could destroy some pancakes right about now.”

“Totally,” Patrice says. All other frustrations aside, he still can’t shake the undercurrent of guilt that surges through him every time he’s reminded of how often he’s been blowing his friends off lately. “I’ll buy, since you’re helping me out.”

Guilt pancakes.

“Hey sweet!” Marchy grins broadly as he shoves the last box into the back seat, and slams the door on its ragged, protruding corner. “Was that it?”

“That’s it,” Patrice confirms, doing a quick glance around the garage. “Go grab your coat, I’ll start the car.”

They spend the first half of the drive in silence, Marchy listlessly paging through a Dean Koontz novel while Patrice keeps an eye on the exits.

“How far is this place, anyway?” Marchy asks, at length. He sets the book aside and turns his gaze on Patrice, who glances down at the GPS on his phone.

“Yeah, it’s up past MTL a few exits.”

“Oh,” says Marchy.

Patrice casts him a suspicious sidelong glance. “What?”

“Nothing,” Marchy says, airily. “But good thing you don’t have soccer this morning. You’d never make it back in time.”

“Uh,” says Patrice. “True…”

Marchy leans back in his seat, turning his gaze to stare out the window at a never ending procession of gas stations and fast-food joints that the early morning sun is just beginning to illuminate. With the same air of pointed nonchalance, he says, “You know, I heard Toews and that Kane kid broke up.”

Patrice’s stomach drops.

“Yeah,” he says, carefully. “They did. Why?”

“No reason,” says Marchy, too quickly. “He was staying with you for awhile, wasn’t he?”

“Marchy.” Patrice sighs. “If you have something to say, just fucking say it already.”

At least Marchy has the decency to blush. “I’m not trying to be an asshole,” he says, hastily. “I swear, man. I’m not. No judgment or whatever, but I’ve been wondering.”

“If Toews and me are dating?” Patrice can’t help the strangled little laugh that follows the question, causing Marchy to wince and roll his eyes.

“Yeah, okay, when you say it like that.” He makes a face. “Sorry, I didn’t mean--”

“It’s fine.” The firmness in Patrice’s voice surprises even him, and Marchy’s eyebrows go up. “No, um. I can actually kind of see…But no, dude. We’re just friends. He’s not-- I mean, I’m not really--
Yeah. No, there’s nothing there.”

“Okay.” says Marchy, carefully. He’s still watching Patrice, while Patrice studiously watches the road. “Would you tell me if there was someone, though?”

The GPS chirps, and Patrice flicks on his signal for their exit.

“Marchy—”

“Because if there is, it’s totally your call if you wanna tell me, but I just really fucking hope you wouldn’t not tell me because you’re worried I’d, like, I dunno. Be weird about it or...something.”

Patrice’s heart is beating in his ears and his palms are clammy where he’s white-knuckling the wheel.

The silence stretches on, well beyond the bounds of reasonable denial. Geno took the bigger risk, considering he’d come out to his whole team. Even if he thought he could lie right now, Patrice doesn’t think he’d be able to live with himself.

“Marchy,” he says again. He sighs. “What if I don’t really want to talk about it?”

“Then don’t.” Marchy says, although his face is alight with an expression of unabashed triumph. “But it’d also be nice if you stopped acting like I’m an idiot who doesn’t notice stuff.”


“I dunno, dude. You’ve always been meh about girls and dating and stuff. And you’re super tight with the out-and-proud poster-child of our league, which—”

“Just because I’m friends with a gay dude doesn’t mean—” Patrice cuts in, indignantly, but Marchy steamrolls right back over him.

“Doesn’t mean you’re gay. Duh. But,” Marchy says, loudly, before Patrice can interrupt again, “I also get why it might be nice to hang out with someone who, like, gets that kinda stuff, or whatever.”

Patrice is glad they’re stopped at a light, because he knows he’s staring. “So if I were, um. If I was into guys, you’d be cool with it?”

Marchy groans. “Yes! Yes, I’d be fine. I could give a fuck whether you like chicks or dudes or sheep, for chrissakes. What pisses me off is that this is somehow news to you.”

Patrice is silent for a long moment. “So,” he says, slowly. “You’d be cool if I was into banging sheep? That’s convenient, because—”

“You aren’t funny!” Marchy shouts, punctuating each word with a punch to Patrice’s shoulder.

“Ow, ow!” Patrice giggles, trying to fend him off and drive at the same time. “Sorry, geez. But at least that’ll be good news for Segs— Ow!”

Marchy’s grinning, and Patrice grins back, even as his nerves still thrum with anxiety.

“So,” Marchy says, when things have finally calmed down. “It’s not Toews?”

“It’s not Toews.”

Marchy snorts. “Thank fuck. But there is a guy?”
“There…” Patrice worries his lip between his teeth, fingers fidgeting on the wheel. He nods. “Yeah, there is.”

“Are you gonna tell me who he is? Do I know him?” Marchy is alight again, and Patrice isn’t sure if he wants to laugh or hit him, or both.

“I’ve been trying to keep it secret,” he says.

“Yeah, I know,” Marchy says. “Like an asshole.”

“Look, it’s complicated,” Patrice starts, defensively. “You’re cool with it, obviously, but not everybody is, and it’s his business, too, not just mine, if anyone finds out.”

“Dude, you know the team would have your back, right?” Marchy asks, brows furrowed. “You know none of us would--”

“I don’t know that, though,” Patrice says, desperately. He feels almost frantic that Marchy understand. “I don’t know, and I can’t be sure, and it’s not even fair to put any of you guys in that position.”

“In what position, exactly?” Marchy demands. “You mean, having to prove that we’re not a bunch of dickbags? We were all around, too, dude. We all saw what went down season before last, when Madison did that awareness campaign with Toews.”

“That’s kind of my point,” Patrice, says, quietly. “I don’t want something like that. I don’t think Johnny wanted it, either, but he was still a freshman, so him and Kane just kind of ignored it and let all the grownups do their thing. But I don’t want to deal with that. I don’t want everyone, like, looking at me, and talking about me, unless it’s about actual hockey, you know? Who I want to date should have nothing to do with that, it’s nobody else’s business. I think Johnny is still halfway convinced they gave him the captaincy because of all that, and that would make me crazy”

“Yeah,” Marchy says, carefully, “except you already are captain. And if I ever catch you repeating this to anyone ever I will straight up murder you in cold blood, but Toews is a solid captain, too. Even if he got the C for coming out, as some kind of fucked publicity stunt, hasn’t he kind of shut any of the doubters up at this point?”

Patrice lets out a groan of frustration. “You’re totally missing the point! Even if he has, or if I already have the C or whatever, the second anyone finds out I’m gay, it becomes part of the narrative. If I want to get a scholarship, or get scouted or whatever, it’s going to be something they consider. Not just whether or not I can win faceoffs, or score, or play a solid game, but the fact that I can do any of those things while being gay.”

Just saying it out loud leaves a bad taste in his mouth.

“Okay, maybe you’re right,” Marchy says. His voice is quiet, but deliberate. “And I know it’s totally not my call, and I won’t judge regardless, but don’t you think…I mean. Is it any better, this way? Hiding something like this, even from your best friends, because you’re worried some asshole college scout isn’t going to be able to see one of the best forwards in our league around the fact that he’s gay? Would you even want to play for someone like that?”

Patrice glares at his knuckles where they’re gripping the steering wheel in front of him. “Easy for you to say,” he mutters.

Next to him, Marchy makes a chuh noise in his throat. “Look, I may not know exactly what you’re dealing with, sure, but I think we can both agree that your play speaks for itself. Meanwhile, some of
us have to work five times as hard to get noticed, just because of our size.”

“Are you seriously comparing my being gay to your being short,” Patrice asks, incredulously.

“Last I checked, one of those things is an actual factor scouts look out for, and one is not,” Marchy says, with dignity. “I think you know which is which.”

“Yeah, okay, on paper, maybe,” Patrice mutters, but Marchy elbows him.

“Fine, yeah, there are bigots in the world. It’s a scientific fact or whatever. But it’s your choice, if you wanna let them have the last say on who you are.”

“When the hell did you get all-- all insightful,” Patrice demands. He turns them onto a shaded side-street with perhaps a bit more force than necessary, and Marchy grabs for the handle above his seat.

“Maybe while you were off sneaking around with your boyfriend, avoiding me,” he counters.

Patrice glares, and Marchy glares right back.

“Fine,” Patrice says. “Fine. I promise I’ll stop hiding stuff from you. But I don’t think I’m ready to tell anyone else, yet. Can you deal with that?”

“Dude, it’s entirely up to you,” Marchy says. “My only argument is that maybe you could start giving some of us the benefit of the doubt, yeah?”

“What about Segs?”

Marchy winces. “I mean, it’s you, dude. He thinks the sun shines out of your ass.”

“He also called Crosby on Consol a fag last year, after that diving call.”

“Yeah,” Marchy says, quietly. “Yeah, I know. I keep thinking about that, too. I don’t think he meant it like that, but--”

“There’s kind of only one way to mean that shit,” Patrice says. “When you come down to it.”

“He’s a stupid kid. Which isn’t an excuse,” Marchy adds, hastily, when Patrice narrows his eyes. “I just meant, maybe with some education in how to not be a total fucking moron, he’d be okay.”

Patrice finally pulls into the church parking lot. It’s nearly empty, save a couple of cars parked in front of the main entrance, which looms dark and uninviting against the chilly morning light.

“I just wish it didn’t have to be like this,” Patrice says, shutting off the ignition and leaning back in his seat. “You, know, that I have this thing everyone’s going to want to talk about, if they find out.”

“I think you’re giving yourself a lot of credit there, dude,” Marchy says, eyebrows quirking. “We don’t actually spend a whole lot of time discussing you when you aren’t around.”

Patrice punches him in the thigh. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, and I’m serious,” Marchy persists, cackling as he fends off another attack. “Stop trying to hit me for being honest! We love you, and all, but don’t you think we have better things to-- Ow, hey, cut it out!”

They spill out of the car, Marchy muttering under his breath and making a show of rubbing his injured thigh, while Patrice pops the trunk.
It takes all of five minutes to haul the boxes of books through a series of musty basement corridors, depositing them with innumerable others against a pallid pastel wall.

“Pancakes?” Marchy says, hopefully.

Patrice dusts his hands off on his jeans, nodding. “Pancakes.”

They drive in silence for a few minutes, radio turned low. It’s comfortable, companionable, and Patrice lost in a fantasy about what he’s going to order once they get to the diner when Marchy speaks up.

“So, you sure you don’t want to tell me who this guy is?”

Patrice groans. “Yes.”

“Why?” Marchy persists. He’s lost the serious tone, and there’s a familiar glint back in his eyes that means danger, if Patrice tries to ignore him. “Oh my god, is he on our team?”

Patrice thinks of Danny Paielle, and his blood runs cold for an instant.

“No,” he says, evenly. “No, he’s not on our team.”

“But he plays in our league.” It’s not a question.

“I want to respect his privacy,” Patrice tries, but Marchy snorts derisively.

“Who’m I gonna tell? If I’m not telling anyone about you, why would I out him?”

They’re not mad at each other. This isn’t what mad looks like, but Patrice still feels it like a weight to his chest; this heavy, difficult thing, because Marchy’s always had his back, no matter what. This should be no different.

He swallows and says, “Dude, you know I trust you, right?”

“I know,” Marchy says.

“And you know this is way more complicated than, like, I dunno. Pretty much anything I’ve dealt with before, I guess.”

“I know,” Marchy repeats. “I don’t think I completely understand your ways of thinking about it, but yeah. I know. Have I ever fucking let you down, dog?”

“Don’t call me that,” Patrice says, rolling his eyes, and Marchy grins over at him, quick and bright.

“I’m for real, though,” Marchy persists. “I’m not going to spill the beans to anyone. Pinky swear.”

“You gonna let me off the hook if I tell you again that I don’t want to talk about it?” he asks, even though he already knows the answer.

“You really don’t want to tell me, and you don’t have to, but even if plays for MTL, man, I’ll be cool with it. You know.”

Patrice nods. He knows.

“He’s doesn’t go to MTL.” He focuses on the road out in front of him. They’re back on the highway now, counting down the exits getting closer and closer to the diner. If he doesn’t do it now, the spell
is broken, the moment passed, and they’ll have to start all over from scratch.

“He goes to Consol.”

“Holy shit,” Marchy breathes, eyes going big as dinner plates. “Holy shit, are you dating Crosby? Is that why you said--”

“No, oh my god, not Crosby,” Patrice says, stifling the semi-hysterical giggles that threaten to spill out of him.

“Are you sure?” Marchy asks. “Because you’re acting like a freak right now, and that would definitely be something you picked up under his influence.”

“It’s not Sid!” Patrice swats at him, even as Marchy dissolves into snickering. “There’s nothing wrong with Sid, man. Geno would have my fucking head if I said anything bad about Sid.”

He stops at a light, turning to watch the moment of realization dawn over Marchy’s face. Patrice is almost embarrassed for him, by how long it takes.

“Malkin?” Marchy says, slowly. Patrice can almost hear his brain working. “You and Malkin?”

Patrice flinches. He says, “Yeah. So if you could just--”


This may actually be the first time Patrice has ever seen Brad Marchand rendered utterly speechless.

“I know it looks kind of bad,” he tries, but Marchy cuts him off again.

“No way, bro,” he continues. “You want to date a Russian meathead for fun, you do you. But does that guy even speak any English?”

“Fuck off,” Patrice says, rolling his eyes. “Yes. He’s a good dude.”

“It’s good, eh?” Marchy snorts.

“Together, together,” Marchy says, voice lacking any inflection at all. “Like, hand-holdy, dating shit? I mean, that’s what I thought, you know, with you being MIA every Saturday for the last fucking however long. But I was hoping it was some geek from the Mathletes or something. Not a fucking rival captain.” He pauses, then adds, “Actually, fuck you, I take it back. I don’t want to have to make nice with those Mathletes losers either. Why don’t you just have better taste?”

“Better taste in friends, maybe,” Patrice mutters, and Marchy pulls a face at him.

“Shit man,” Marchy says, suddenly. “I didn’t even think about it before. How are you and Malkin gonna deal with it if we see Causeway in playoffs?”

Patrice’s stomach drops. “I’ve been trying not to think about it,” he says, honestly.

Marchy gives a low whistle. “That’s gonna be weird.”
“No shit.” Patrice doesn’t mean to snap, but come on. “We don’t really talk much about hockey stuff. Or like, team stuff, I guess. I think it works better that way.”

“Fair enough,” says Marchy. “But no more of that Wrestlemania bullshit on the ice, yeah? No getting kicked off, with the championship on the line.”

“That was before we got together,” Patrice grumbles, rolling his eyes as he turns into the diner’s parking lot. “We don’t do that shit anymore.”

“Right, well.” Marchy raises his eyebrows significantly, and leans back. “Then I just hope he’ll be cool when you and your boys hand him and his boys their asses next week.”

Patrice tries to laugh, but it comes out more as a small choking sound. “Yeah,” he says. “Yeah. So. Breakfast?”
March: Johnny

Chapter Notes

BONUS GUILT CHAPTER WHAT UP

Watching the Scott Prep guys come out for pre-game warmups, Johnny sincerely does not remember them being so collectively enormous.

“Are we sure they’re all actually in high school,” Carbomb mutters, dropping down on the ice next beside Johnny to stretch. He has the unmistakable look in his eye that Johnny usually associates with a lot of impending penalty kills.

Across the ice, Pat and Bryan are horsing around, and Johnny loses his train of thought, watching them.

“Got your head on straight?” Carbomb asks, following Johnny’s gaze and frowning.

Johnny glares at him. “Yes.”

“Right,” says Carbomb. “Just asking.”

“Cap’s good,” says Emery, leaning out over the boards and snapping his gum loudly. “Only guy I know who plays better when he’s heartbroken.”

“Shut up,” Johnny says, as Carbomb and Ray guffaw loudly. “Both of you. I don’t need a fucking babysitter.”

“Nah, but Pat might,” Carbomb says, nodding to where Scott Prep’s hulking top line is assembling themselves near the center faceoff dot. “I bet he’s feeling pretty okay about that demotion to third line right about now.”

The starting buzzer sounds, Johnny wins the faceoff, and Pat puts Madison on the board with three minutes into the first period, but then Oshie ties it right back up again for Scott Prep less than a minute later. He grins obnoxiously and waves at Johnny as he cycles past their bench, and Johnny makes a face back at him.

“I hate that kid,” Saad grumbles from down the bench. “He scores against us every time we play them.”

Pat snorts. “Johnny’s friends with him. They played peewee together. Hey, Jon,” he calls, leaning forward around their teammates clustered together on the bench between them, “next time you talk to him, tell him that goal was as bug-ugly as he is.”

“Dude, shut up,” Johnny hears Bryan mutter, but he loses Pat’s retort under the buzzer ending the first period of play.

“Just skate like hell,” Carbomb says, as they troop back to the room between periods. “You guys are way faster than those monsters they’re running against us, so Johnny, you and Saader just stay up high in our zone. I’ll try to hit one of you with a pass so we can just cherry-pick these fuckers.”
Saad nods earnestly, but Johnny snorts a laugh. “Aw, Dan, getting bitter about not being the biggest, meanest thing out there?”

“Shut up,” Carbomb tells him stoically. “Shut up and skate, asshole.”

Things heat up and the closely organized chaos starts to unravel, piece by piece. Johnny watches Carbomb grin like a maniac as he knocks one of Scott’s top liners off the puck for Saad to pick up, with a clear lane straight to the net. He feels it in his bones before he even makes it happen; the simple setup, the neat little pass, and he’s batting the puck in over the goalie’s skate, easy as pie. Like reading from a script.

What he’s not expecting is a couple seconds later, when one of the Scott guys conveniently forgets to stop after the whistle, and plows him straight into the post.

There’s an immediate scuffle. Johnny is on his feet before he even realizes what he’s doing, ready to launch himself into the mass of shouting and shoving bodies when Hjammer’s glove on his arm holds him back.

“Easy, killer. Dan’s got it.”

Sure enough, the scrum is already dissipating, the refs resignedly hauling Carbomb and the Scott guy away from each other toward their respective penalty boxes. Carcillo is still shouting through bloody teeth, while the other kid’s eye is swelling and bruised. That’s no surprise, though. The real surprise is Pat on his feet, straining toward the scrum even as he’s being held back by Bicks, shouting inarticulately under the buzz of the crowd.

Johnny dusts himself off, taking his time in skating back over to the benches, and looking anywhere but at Pat. A tinny voice over the PA announces Madison Tech number thirteen and Scott Prep number forty-two, five minutes for fighting. Scott Prep number forty-two, two minute instigator penalty.

The power play is a blur. The Scott guys clearly don’t like being on their heels, but they get sloppy for it, and Johnny takes second shift, putting Madison up by another off a long pass from Pat at the point with ten seconds left on the clock. They’ve still got a period and change left to go, but it feels like victory.

“Fuck yeah, baby!” Pat shouts, collapsing between Johnny and Bicks in the dressing room and jostling them both. “Fuck yeah, that’s how we fucking do!”

Johnny rolls his eyes, hiding a smile behind the blade of his stick as he makes a show of re-taping it.

“We’ve given you worse,” Pat says, and then immediately seems to rethink this statement, going pink under his helmet. “Uh, I mean--”

“I know what you mean,” Johnny says. “Nah, my neck’ll probably be a little stiff for a couple days, but I’m fine.”

“That fucker deserved worse than Dan gave him,” Pat says finally, huffing and rolling his eyes when Johnny gives him a look. “He did! That was a dirty fucking hit, dude. Getting his panties in a twist because they went down a point? What a douche.”
“And then we put them down another,” Johnny says serenely. “Which is a much better plan than storming over and getting yourself landed in the box with Danny. Yeah, dude, I saw you,” he adds, at the look on Pat’s face. “Good thing Bicks has you on a short leash.”

“Ha ha,” Pat intones, sticking his tongue out. “Whatever, dude. I’ve never heard you bitch about me defending your honor before.”

“You don’t fight,” Johnny says. “Don’t start now. Especially not with your girlfriend watching.”

Next to him, Pat goes bright red.

They win, three-two.

Pat slumps down on the bench beside Johnny, even though his cubby is on the opposite end of the row, pushing his soaked bangs off his face and offering over his water bottle.

“Thirsty?”

It’s easier to look down at the bottle than at Pat’s face, and Johnny reaches for it reflexively before stopping himself.

“Nah, man. Thanks, but I got my own,” he says, quietly. Johnny can feel eyes on them and when he glances up, Ray is watching them beadily as he unbuckles his pads. He meets Johnny’s eyes and hikes an eyebrow.

Pat doesn’t seem to notice, shrugging and taking another swig from his water bottle. “Okay. It’s blue Gatorade, so I just thought I’d offer. That’s the kind you like, right?”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. He busies himself with his skate laces and forces a smile. “Thanks for the thought.”

“Uh-huh.” Pat sits another few seconds before scooting back down the bench to start taking off his gear, turning to talk to Saad and Bickell, and giving Johnny a view of his back.

“How’s it shakin’?”

Johnny turns, startled. He hadn’t even noticed Bollig sitting down on his other side, but there he is, with half his gear already off.

“Fucking wiped,” Johnny says, grateful for the excuse to face a different direction, one where Ray Emery isn’t still giving him a knowing stare over his ex-boyfriend’s stupid blond head. “How ‘bout you?”

Brandon grimaces. “Another game, another minus-two. Probably means another week of Duncs putting us through remedial drills. We tried telling him we’re all fine on the fourth line, but I think he’s still convinced he can turn us all into Junior A’s if he tries hard enough.”

“Duncan Keith: Humanitarian,” Johnny says drily, and Brandon grins.

“Right? I never have the heart to let him down easy, but he’ll probably figure it out when they have to call an ambulance.”

Johnny laughs, balling up his socks with his practice jersey and tossing the whole mess into his bag. When he looks up, Brandon is beaming at him.

“What?” Johnny asks, suddenly self conscious.
“I dunno,” Brandon shrugs. “It’s just been awhile since I’ve seen you laugh. Or smile. Or like, make any kind of facial expression.”

“I smile,” Johnny protests, swatting Brandon with one of his gloves as he stuffs them into the bag. “I totally have facial expressions.”

“Yeah?” Brandon looks dubious, which is ridiculous, because Johnny totally smiles and laughs and it’s been at least a couple of weeks since he stopped feeling completely like miserable roadkill.

“Yes,” Johnny says stalwartly. “Last Friday, when we won. I was very happy and I smiled and laughed and it was great. You were there, so you should remember.”

“Psh, winning games doesn’t count,” Brandon scoffs, and then snorts a laugh at the appalled look on Johnny’s face. “Okay, okay, jeez. Don’t get your blood pressure up, I was just kidding.”

“I fucking hope so,” Johnny says with dignity. He gets the last of his gear situated and digs out a towel. “And now I’m going to go shower, which I am very happy about, so you can put that down in the mood log you’re keeping on me.”

“Happy shower time, got it,” Brandon says, making a note on his palm with an invisible pencil.

“You’re hilarious,” Johnny tells him.

“I know, right?” Brandon beams. “Hey, I just had a thought. What’re you doing tonight?”

Johnny shrugs. “Not a lot. Why?”

“There’s a club downtown, Avec. Usually they only do under-18 nights on Thursdays, but they moved it to a Friday this week. It could be fun, I mean, if you haven’t already reached your quota of smiley fun for one night.” He grins, as Johnny tosses a wadded up ball of tape at his head.

“Yeah, Patrice told me about that place awhile back. I dunno, man. I don’t think it’s really my deal.”

Brandon waves him off. “It’s low lights, dancing, and overpriced soda pop. It’s everyone’s deal. Come on, Cap, live a little.”

Johnny hesitates. “I don’t want to stay out super late,” he says, warningly.

“We’ll have you home before you turn into a pumpkin,” Brandon assures him. “Roger that.”

“Should we see if Patrice wants to come?” Johnny asks. He glances over his shoulder at the rest of the room, suddenly very aware of how quiet it is, but it’s mostly cleared out, and the guys who are still left seem too distracted with their own conversations to notice or care about Johnny’s plans to visit a notorious hookup spot.

“You can try,” Brandon says, “but he’s always busy lately.”

“Just lately?” Johnny snorts. “Okay, I’ll text him after I shower. What time do you wanna meet there?”

“Ten-ish?” Brandon shrugs. “Is that too late for you, Grandpa?”

Johnny makes a face at him. “No, that’s fine, smartass.”

He makes a point of whacking Brandon with his towel as he heads for the showers.
Patrice doesn’t answer any of Johnny’s texts until Johnny’s pulling into Avec’s crowded parking lot.

*Late game tonight, sorry. Come out with me and the guys after soccer on Saturday*, he texts, which catches Johnny by surprise. In their years of being friendly, there hasn’t ever been much intermingling between their separate social groups. Unless you count parties, which Johnny doesn’t.

But he sends, *sure, sounds good*, before heading for the entrance.

The place is a zoo. He finds Brandon loitering outside the main entrance and playing a game on his phone as he waits.

“I didn’t think it’d be so crowded,” Johnny says, nearly shouts, over the bass beat emanating through the double-doors every time they open to let another group of kids in or out. It’s cold and windy, but that doesn’t seem to be stopping the social scene in the side lot. He lowers his voice adding, “And isn’t this like, a gay club, or whatever?”

Brandon follows his eyes to where a guy and girl are disappearing together into the dark and shrugs. “Yep. But you know of any other clubs that let teenagers in on a Friday night?”

“Fair point.”

Brandon chuffs him on the shoulder. “Right. Now c’mon in, I’m freezing. I’ll spot your cover if you get me a Coke.”

He herds Johnny in the main entrance, handing a ten to the bored-looking bouncer stationed just inside on a stool and leading him through the crowd to the small back bar.

Johnny isn’t sure what to think of it. It’s not what he was expecting, when Patrice had mentioned it weeks before. He’d pictured a little more coffee shop-vibe, a little less glo-stick dance party. The colors swirl and run together as he watches, caught in the pulse of a strobe set to Lady Gaga.

“I never know what to do in places like this,” he says, bellows, into Brandon’s ear, leaning close to be heard, but Brandon shakes his head.

“Give it a chance,” he shouts back, and then points to the chalkboard menu behind the bar and mouths, *Coke.*

Reluctantly, Johnny flags down the bartender and orders for them, wedging himself into a corner once he has his drink and letting his eyes adjust. He’s never been the dancing type, or even really the partying type. That was always Pat’s thing, and Pat was Johnny’s thing, so he’d always been happy to go along.

He’d liked the way Pat would find the loudest room, right next to the speakers; how they’d never had to hear each other speak, Pat just knew to fit them together, his back to Johnny’s front, and keep his ass nice and snug over Johnny’s dick through their jeans. Promising. He’d keep a hand back on Johnny’s hip and just sway a little until Johnny’s awkward hands found his waist and settled there. And then everything else would just be background noise to Pat’s body under Johnny’s hands, and how he always smelled good, warm and familiar, when Johnny would press his nose behind Pat’s ear.

Johnny had been fearless, then.

He’d been impervious. Hadn’t thought about what people might think or say or do about them, not
really, because he’d felt more like himself doing things he’d never ordinarily do with Pat than he did in his own bedroom. Everything else was only ever just background noise.

And now it’s been weeks, and Johnny still hasn’t figured out what to do with his hands.

He clutches his glass and pokes the lemon wedge around between the ice cubes with a cocktail straw, already crimped from nervous chewing. Diet Coke with lemon. Johnny goes out to a club and orders his mom’s favorite drink. Typical. He really wishes it were something stronger. Or maybe that he’d just stayed home. He could be watching HGTV reruns on Netflix right now.

“Krugs and Fro are here.” Brandon’s voice in his ear makes Johnny jump, which he tries to cover by following Brandon’s pointed finger to the dance floor.

“How’d they even get in?” Johnny says, jerking his head at the flier tacked to the wall behind their heads advertising *Teen Night! Sixteen and up, must show valid ID.*

Brandon rolls his eyes. “We didn’t get carded, either, dude. I think this place only gives a fuck if you look, like. Twelve years old or whatever.”

“So what do they look like?” Johnny says, and then does a double-take as the lights flash brighter for a beat, illuminating their sweaty, giggling faces. “And is Fro wearing eyeliner?”

“Oh, this is way more fun than I thought it would be,” Brandon says, clapping Johnny on the shoulder with a smirk. “Chill out, dude. They just come to dance. I’m pretty sure they get into way less dumb shit than we did as sophomores.”

“Shut up,” Johnny tells him, swatting his hand away and taking a dignified sip of his drink. “I’m just looking out. If they get in trouble and get booted off the team, there goes the core of our penalty kill.”

“Hypocrite,” says Brandon. “How’s that underage drinking worked out for you so far, eh, *Captain*?”


“God,” Brandon says, tone suddenly a lot less jovial. “Heads up. This ought to be fun.”

“Uh,” says Johnny, glancing over his shoulder and following Brandon’s gaze. “What?”

“Brandon Bollig, you’re moving up in the world.”

The first words that pop into Johnny’s head are *Wow, pretty,* but then he checks himself as recognition hits.

“Price?” he says, trying not to sound as dumb as he feels in the inevitable moment of disconnect, seeing another player off the ice, out of gear. “You’re Carey Price, from MTL, right?”

“Hey, Toews,” says Price. He’d always seemed like a quiet, kind of awkward kid at the rink, in their limited interactions, but here he seems more settled into his own skin. He fixes Johnny with a lazy smile.

Brandon looks almost comically resigned.

“Fancy seeing you here,” Price says to Johnny. “I thought your type was...blonder.” He smiles sweetly at Brandon, who rolls his eyes.

“Um,” says Johnny. “I’m. We’re not...” He gestures lamely between Brandon and himself, feeling his cheeks heat in the already stuffy room.
“He’s not my date,” Brandon translates. He smirks. “Don’t worry, Price, you don’t have to be jealous. I’m still single like Kraft cheese, baby. Just say the words.”

Johnny doesn’t ask for details, but he’s pretty sure Brandon’s Kraft cheese detail isn’t entirely true lately. Not that he’s about to ask, and ruin the way Price gets all flustered and indignant.

“Oh, keep dreaming, Bollig,” says Price, dark eyes narrowing under long, long lashes before his gaze returns to Johnny. “You know I don’t mess around with anyone under second line. Anyway, I heard a rumor that your boy here is back on the market.”

“Price has a thing for captains,” Brandon tells Johnny, sounding bored. Johnny’s glad it’s too dark in here for anyone to see how gross and splotchy he gets when he blushes. “He thinks you guys are like Pokémon or some shit.”

“Price has a thing for talent,” Price corrects Brandon serenely. “But status is hot, too.”

“Oh,” says Johnny, for lack of any better ideas. “I, uh. Thanks, but I’m not really looking for anything right now.”

Price shrugs. “Fair enough. But if you’re looking for anything in an hour or two, I’ll be around.”

He turns, and disappears back into the milling crowd. Next to Johnny’s ear, Brandon makes a quiet gagging sound.

“Like Kraft cheese, huh?” Johnny says, grinning at him, and Brandon elbows him in the side.

“Shut up.”

After an hour or so of people-watching, Brandon disappears off to bother Kruger and Frolik, while Johnny poaches a newly vacated stool at the bar. If anything, it’s gotten even more crowded in here since they arrived, and claustrophobia is starting to get the better of him as people keep elbowing around him in pursuit of fresh drinks.

Johnny is just starting to think thoughts about heading home when a commotion breaks out a few feet away, loud, angry voices breaking through the ambient din of dance music and conversation.

“-the fuck,” Johnny catches, and then nearly gets shoved off his stool as people standing in between him and the commotion get pushed back by whatever’s going on.

He cranes around the indignant muttering and catches sight of two guys standing practically nose to nose, the taller one shouting something unintelligible while the shorter one, a familiar-looking black guy in a MTL letter jacket, throws back his head and laughs raucously.

The tall guy turns and Johnny can see his face, and sure enough, he’s familiar, too. Another Junior, one of Patrice’s guys from Causeway.

Surprise.

He’s snarling, hackles up, fists balled at his sides, and Johnny’s had enough practice lip-reading from the bench to know nothing he’s saying is family-friendly.

Before he can decide what to do, Price reappears at the MTL guy’s side, and for a moment Johnny is naively relieved, thinking maybe he’ll smooth things out. Instead, Price says something and the other MTL guy laughs and then the Causeway kid lunging for them both.
Johnny’s moving before he really has time to think, pushing through the crowd and locking onto the kid’s arm and trying to herd him back. Johnny has played hockey since he can remember; he’s never been small, never been easy to move, but the Causeway kid -- Lou..? Lucky..? L-something, Johnny can’t remember or he’d be shouting it right about now into the guy’s face -- is fucking big. A behemoth who doesn’t even seem to notice Johnny attached to him until he tries to move and finds himself held back. Sort of. Johnny’s pretty sure at least one of their arms is going to be dislocated if the kid tries to lunge again.

Somewhere, behind the gathered crowd, Johnny sees the security guy from the door earlier trying to move in towards the scuffle, and to hell with that mess. Johnny is not taking the fall for these idiots.

“Walk the fuck away,” he grinds at Price, still keeping the Causeway kid behind him, who, thankfully, seems to have put a pin in his human bulldozer routine for the moment.

Price meets his eyes, hair in disarray and hat lost somewhere in the turmoil, raw anger twisting his pretty face. Behind him, though, his buddy just shrugs and gives the back of his shirt a tug.

“C’mon, man,” he says. “Carey, chill out. It’s cool. We were just messing around, right?” He casts Johnny an appraising look as he says it, all easy grin and flashing eyes, like seconds before he hadn’t been ready to throw down with a tank.

A tank who, when Johnny turns to give him a cautious glance, just shrugs and grunts. “Sure. Whatever.” He pushes past Johnny and the lingering remnants of the spectating crowd, heading for the back exit. “See you motherfuckers on the ice soon enough,” Johnny hears him mutter.

Johnny hesitates only a moment before following in his wake, having no intention to stick around and deal with disgruntled club security.

Outside, it’s gotten colder, or maybe inside was just really hot by comparison. Johnny tugs his jacket on as he walks, zipping it all the way to his chin and ducking his head down against the wind that’s picked up, sending dry flurries of snow scuttling around his ankles.

“Yo!”

He draws up short, turning. The Causeway guy is hunkered against the brick wall just outside of the yellow glow cast by a low-watt sodium bulb. He’s just in a longsleeve t-shirt without a coat and Johnny feels bad for him, but not bad enough to offer his own.

“Hi,” he says. After shouting all night to be heard above the noise in the club, his voice feels suddenly too loud in his own ears. “What the hell was that?”

The kid frowns, hunching his shoulders like a little boy ready for a scolding, and Johnny has to force himself not to laugh at the absurdity of that, from size differential alone.

“MTL guys are shitholes,” he says, by way of explanation. “PK’s always trying to start shit and then just play it off, I should know better by this point not to get caught up with him.”

“No kidding,” Johnny agrees.

The kid snorts a derisive laugh, glancing up and finally seeming to register Johnny for the first time. “Oh hey, you’re Bergy’s guy. Toews, from Madison.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “Yep.” He’s trying his best not to look as relieved as he feels that the kid doesn’t seem to need any talking down. If anything, he mostly just looks embarrassed, running fingers through his short dark hair and drawing in on himself even more, although that might have
more to do with the cold.


“Oh!” Johnny shakes his hand, feeling weirdly formal after practically having to wrestle this guy out of a club. “Hey, yeah. I remember you. Our board op always mispronounces your last name.”

Lucic makes a face. “Yours and everybody’s. Whatever, Davy totally has it worse. Hey, speak of the devil!”

Johnny is halfway through asking, “Who the hell is Davy?” when the door opens again and another, shorter kid Johnny vaguely recognizes from Causeway games spills out, looking frantic.

“Looch? Looch! What the *fuck*, man! I was in the bathroom and I come out and everyone is talking about some fight and I couldn’t find you and what the *fuck*?” He blows right past like Johnny isn’t there, tugging and prodding Lucic for a businesslike inspection before thrusting a wadded up coat at him. “Put this on, motherfucker, before you catch hypothermia and die. God, you are so dumb sometimes.”

The last vestiges of tension in Lucic’s shoulders visibly ease, and he takes the coat, shrugging it on and rubbing at his arms to get warm. Davy still looks like a lit firecracker, but Lucic has gone all soft around the eyes watching him.

“Dude, it’s fine,” he says, low and soothing. He reaches for Davy’s wrist and gives it a tug. “Seriously, it was over in like thirty seconds, I just got into it with PK for a sec, and then Price showed up and started chirping his big mouth. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No *shit*,” Davy snaps, but he looks visibly calmer. He’s got an accent; slight, but noticeable, especially now that he’s not shouting. “You wanna get kicked off the team? You heard what Coach said after Bergy and the Consol kid got into it. Price is a little bitch, he’d love to see you taken out so you can’t keep scoring on him.”

Lucic snorts, elbowing him. “You say the nicest things.”

“Just because I care,” Davy grumbles, but he smiles a little and elbows back. “Um,” he adds, glancing up and apparently only just noticing Johnny. “Why is the Madison captain standing around staring at us.”

Johnny had been quietly edging away, trying to make up his mind about exactly how rude it would be to just duck back into the club without saying goodbye.

“Um,” he says, and hesitates. Jealous, overprotective boyfriends are not a thing he’s remotely equipped to handle right now.

“He got Price out of my face,” Lucic says. “He’s cool.”

“That’s what Bergy keeps telling us,” Davy says. He doesn’t sound entirely convinced. He eyes Johnny, and Johnny stares right back.

“Yeah, well,” Johnny says. “I’m gonna take my cool self back inside now and find my friend. You guys have a good night.”

“Thanks,” Lucic says. He sounds like he means it. “Stay out of trouble.”

Johnny snorts a laugh. “You too.”
He leaves them, Davy still fussing and grumbling, and pushes back inside. It’s blessedly warm, and he finds Brandon back near the bar with a fresh Coke in hand, nodding along to something Frolik is saying.

Fro’s cheeks flush dark under the flashing lights when he sees Johnny, breaking off mid-sentence. Negligent doormen notwithstanding, Johnny can’t begin to figure out how anyone would believe this kid is sixteen.

“Krugs had to take off, and Mikey here was just telling me about your daring heroics,” Brandon shouts over the music, grinning at Johnny. “If you didn’t have Pricey’s attention before, I’m pretty sure you do now.”

Frolik looks even more embarrassed, but Johnny just says, “Oh, please. I didn’t even really do anything. I think I’m gonna take off, too, though. It’s getting late.”

He fistbumps Brandon, and catches Fro in a sort of awkward half-handshake. Underclassmen are so weird.

“Catch you later, Cap,” Brandon says.

Back out in his truck, Johnny pulls out his phone and briefly considers texting Patrice about the incident with his teammates. On the one hand, he’d want to know if his guys were pulling dumb shit that could potentially get them kicked off the team. On the other, he knows his guys pull dumb shit all the time that could potentially get them kicked off the team, and whenever they choose not to do it in front of him, he’s eternally grateful for the plausible deniability.

Johnny pockets his phone and starts the truck.
March: Geno

Geno can hear shouting before he even gets the door open.

“No!” Denis is yelling. There’s a clang, a clatter, and stomping. “No. Mom, tell him he can’t just waltz back in here and tell us all what to–”

“Don’t try and bring your mother into this.”

Their father’s booming voice reverberates through him as Geno slips in the front door, dropping his bag and hanging up his coat as quietly as possible.

“It’s her restaurant, she makes the schedule, so I can ask--”

“You can do as you’re told,” their father bellows. “It’s this kind of disrespect that proves we never should have--”

“Should have left Russia,” Denis finishes over him in mocking tones. “Save it, Dad. You don’t get to boss us all around whenever you feel like showing up.”

“Denis!” Their mother sounds appalled. “Don’t you dare speak to your father that way.”

“Then don’t you defend him, when you’re more pissed at him than I am!”

Geno clears his throat from the kitchen doorway, and they all turn to stare at him.

“I brought the onions,” he says, holding up a bag. “Mama said we needed them for dinner.”

“Thank you,” says their mother, breaking the frozen tableau and hurrying over to take the bag from him. Her cheeks are flushed, but she sounds brusque when she adds, “You can help your brother set the table for dinner.”

Denis clatters and bangs as he collects cutlery and plates, carting everything out to the table with Geno, and setting places in stony silence.

“What happened?” Geno finally dares to ask, voice low. “You and dad got into it again?”

Denis makes an angry *chuh*, tossing his head. “He overheard me asking Mama if I can swap shifts from this Friday to next Friday, and totally lost his shit. Saying I had no right to question her and blah, blah, blah. I wasn’t *questioning* her, I was just asking! Like we always do.”

Geno rolls his eyes. “He probably just thought--”

“Thought nothing,” Denis hisses, glaring at him. “Why are you trying to defend him? Why is *Mom* trying to? I swear, it’s like you guys want to just go on pretending.”

“Pretending what?” Geno asks, levelly. “He’s our father. I know he’s sort of...old fashioned--” Denis snorts derisively, “but screaming at him just makes it worse.”

“Then what *should* I do?” Denis demands. “Nothing else works, and if I don’t shout, he talks right over me.”

“So,” says Geno, “dial it back. Let him feel like he’s in control.”
Denis looks like he’s about to open his mouth to argue, but their mother chooses that moment to come in, carrying a casserole dish and still looking pinched around the eyes. Their father follows, and leads them all in saying grace, and mercifully doesn’t notice the daggers Denis is glaring at him across the table when everyone’s heads are supposed to be bowed. Geno aims a kick at his ankle under the table, but Denis ignores him.

“Evgeni,” says their father, as he passes around the potatoes, “I hear Consol is in good position for playoffs next month.”

“We are,” says Geno. “Very good.”

“Wonderful!” says their father. “Are you ready?”

“I think so.” Geno fidgets with his fork, frowning. “I was hoping I’d be able to get some new gear before playoffs, my gloves are a mess, but I don’t think I’ll have enough saved up by then.” He shrugs. “It’s fine, I think Sid has extras.”

“The school doesn’t pay for your gear?” his father asks. “I thought you had a scholarship.”

“I do,” says Geno, “but that paid for one set of gear when I started JV, and another when I started Varsity last year. Extra equipment once that wears out is on me. I usually just use my tips from restaurant shifts, but last month the radiator in the Camry went out, and had to fix it.”

Their father is silent for a long moment, chewing contemplatively. Across the table, Geno can feel Denis trying to catch his eye, but he keeps his gaze focused intently on his food.

Finally, their father asks, “Geno, would it help if you took on a few extra shifts? Would you have time, between hockey and your studies?”

Geno nearly chokes. “Yeah,” he says. “Yes, I mean. I could probably do that, if Mama has some openings.”

He chances a glance up at their mother, who’s staring inscrutably at him, but finally nods.

“You can take Denis’s shift this Friday, if you like,” she says. “I’ll see what else I can find.”

“Thanks,” says Geno, quietly.

“You’ve always been driven,” says their father, reaching around the table to clap Geno on the shoulder. “You’re like me that way, you do what has to be done.”

“May I be excused?” Denis asks, hurriedly. He drops his fork, collecting his balled-up napkin from his lap. “I’ll take my plate.”

“You hardly ate,” their father says, but Denis shakes his head.

“I’m full. It’s fine. I have a lot of homework.”

He rushes off without a backward glance, and Geno hears his plate clatter in the sink before his retreating footsteps thud upstairs.

When Geno follows him twenty minutes later, he finds Denis lying on his bed with headphones in, facing the wall. He doesn’t turn when Geno sinks down next to him on the mattress, and doesn’t turn the music off until Geno reaches up and tugs one of his earbuds out.

“What?” he demands, in English.
“You don’t have to work on Friday,” Geno says. “I thought you’d be happy.”

“Happy that you are, once again, the better son?” Denis says, with a humorless laugh. “Gee, yeah, thanks for that.”

“That not what I mean to do,” Geno says, tentatively. “I wanting to help, think it make things better, if Dad less mad, think it his idea.”

“No, now he thinks it’s your idea,” Denis says. He rolls over, finally, fixing Geno with a beady glare. “As usual, he thinks you’re the only one who does anything right around here.”

“Denis--”

“Get out of my room.”

“Denis, I’m sorry,” Geno says, reaching for his arm, willing his brother to believe that none of this had been his plan.

Denis shoves him off, rolling again to face the wall. “I don’t want to hear it,” he says. I puts his earbud back in, and Geno hears the tinny drone of his music blaring.

He sits another minute, but Denis doesn’t budge, so finally Geno gets up and goes back downstairs.

“Flower texted,” he lies, passing his father on the stairs. “I’m going to meet him for ice cream, I’ll be home before curfew.”

Out in the car, he turns on the engine and waits for the interior to warm up before finally making a decision and opening up a new text message.

“What the hell?” says Patrice, sliding into the idling Camry half an hour later. “Are you okay? Your text seemed weird.”

“Fight with my brother,” Geno says, stiffly. “Needed distraction.”

“Words every boy wants to hear,” Patrice says, but he grins when Geno glances sidelong at him. “There’s a cafe down the street here, let’s just go there and hang out. I’d, uh, distract you back at my place,” he waggles eyebrows suggestively, “but my parents are home.”

Geno stops at a light, leaning over to kiss him. It’s quick, and soft, and Patrice grins against his lips and brushes fingers through his hair. He holds Geno’s hand as they stand in line to order Italian sodas and an oversized shortbread cookie. He tugs their chairs closer together in a dimly lit corner, and prods Geno’s shin with the toe of his sneaker until Geno cracks a smile.

“What?”


“I’m still me,” Geno says. “Just, me who doesn’t like fighting with little brother.”

Patrice snorts. “Speaking for little brothers everywhere, you’re probably doing him a service. We need older brothers to be pissed at sometimes. You guys basically exist for us to blame stuff on.”

“What you have to blame on older brother, Prince Patrice,” Geno asks, but his voice still sounds stiff. He sighs.
Patrice reaches over and squeezes his hand, frowning. “Aw, dude, I did all kinds of stupid stuff when we were little. I’d yell at him, he’d yell at me, our parents would yell at both of us. But hey, you look actually upset. What happened? ...Can I ask?”

“You can always ask,” Geno says, quietly, and something in him settles as he watches Patrice’s cheeks go pink. “My dad was mad at Denis.”

“Again?” Patrice asks, brows furrowing.

“Again,” says Geno, sighing. “Long story short, I try to help, it all blow up in my face. Now Denis mad at me, saying I try to make myself look good, make him look worse.”

“Why would you do that?” Patrice asks, quizzically. He prods their cookie across the table at Geno, who breaks some off, just for something to do.

“I wouldn’t,” Geno says. “But Dad always pick on Denis, Denis right about that. Dad wants Denis to play sports, do more things Dad likes, talk about stuff Dad understands. In Russian,” Geno adds, rolling his eyes. “But Denis just want to be Denis. Wants to win science fair, watch American TV show. Dad yell at him and he yell back, and that just make worse.”

“And you got in the middle?” Patrice asks, carefully.

“I was trying to make better,” Geno says again, glaring morosely at the piece of cookie between his fingers before stuffing it into his mouth. “Denis yell at me, say I just make worse. Maybe I not try so hard, next time.”

Patrice sighs, and tosses the last bite of cookie into his mouth. “No offense, but your dad is kind of a piece of work.”

Geno nods, silently.

“He wouldn’t,” Patrice starts, and then hesitates, biting his lip. “He wouldn’t make you guys move back to Russia, would he?”

“He keeps saying he wants to,” Geno says, all too aware of the way Patrice goes still next to him. “But Mama never leave here, and I think that one fight maybe too big for him to try.”

“Good,” breathes Patrice. “Good.”

Geno smiles wryly, looking over at him. “He find out about us, maybe he try, though.”

Patrice is pale, but his jaw set as he says, “Then he is never, ever finding out about us. Never fucking ever, G.”

Geno waits until they’re back in the car to kiss him.
"You’re in a good mood today,” says Johnny, swinging the mesh bag of soccer balls into the back of his truck. “Are you really that excited about beating Edmonton last night? Because I’m pretty sure beating up defenseless little kids is frowned upon in most societies.”

“Shut your face.” Patrice chucks a stack of cones in after the soccer balls and Johnny shuts the door quickly before it can all fall out on top of them. “The win was good, but I dunno. Stuff just doesn’t suck right now. It’s nice.”

Johnny makes a face at him. “Yeah, because your life is usually real tough.”

“Sorry,” Patrice sniffs. “I didn’t realize I wasn’t allowed not to be miserable in your presence.”

Johnny just gives him a wry grin. “Yeah, I guess I’ll have to find some new company, huh?”

“I guess,” says Patrice. “But I guess that means you can’t come over later. Segs and Marchy and a few of the other guys from my team are coming over to hang out around five or so, and I was gonna say you should come by, if you aren’t busy. But I guess if you’ve already got some solitary brooding or whatever it is you do scheduled...” He trails off, grinning.

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Are you sure? I don’t wanna crash some thing between you and your guys.”

“Oh, whatever.” Patrice waves him off. “It’d be cool. But no worries if you’ve got other plans.”

“Can I text you in a couple hours?” Johnny asks. “My mom keeps talking about trying to find a night where all of us are free so we can go to dinner with David, but he usually has school stuff, so I won’t know ‘til this afternoon.”

“Sure,” says Patrice. “Catch you later, man.”

Johnny bumps his shoulder and climbs into the truck, peeling out of the lot before Patrice has even found his keys.

There’s a couple of texts from Geno on his phone when Patrice checks it, and his heart fumbles a beat, something warm and happy unfurling through him.

The first one is a picture, Geno’s hand holding up a greeting card with two fat little cartoon birds, and some Cyrillic writing. The second one says, Old lady came into restaurant selling cards. This one say “thinking of you”. Thinking of you, Patrice.

Patrice hiccups a little laugh, glancing around and feeling silly. He’s alone in a car in an empty parking lot, there’s nobody to see how he’s blushing hot to the roots of his hair, and giggling like an idiot. He clicks back to the picture and looks at it for another long moment, letting the warm, happy buzz overtake him completely, before saving the picture to his phone.
It sucks you have to work until late, he texts back.

He goes to the grocery store and kills some time bumming around in the frozen foods aisle, browsing through until he’s got enough snacks to sustain a small army. Or a handful of high school varsity hockey players.

Johnny texts around four, when Patrice is sorting through his laundry.

*Do I need to bring anything?*

Toews-code for affirmative.

*Nah, unless you want anything special to eat or drink. We’re fresh out of kale.*

*Ha ha, asshole,* Johnny sends back. *See you in an hour.*

Johnny does not bring kale. He shows up with a bag of Sunchips and a punch in the arm for Patrice as he comes in off the stoop.

“Smartass,” he says, by way of greeting.

“No idea what you’re talking about,” says Patrice, following him into the kitchen and getting out a big plastic bowl for the chips. “Marchy, Looch, and Davy are in the living room. We’re just watching *CSI* reruns until Segs shows up.”

“Cool,” says Johnny. “Looch and Davy. Big guy and his overprotective boyfriend, right?”

“No, no, they’re not a couple,” Patrice says, laughing at Johnny’s confused expression. “I mean,” he lowers his voice, muttering, ‘confidentially, I’m pretty sure Looch wants it to go that way, but Davy’s straight as a rail. They’re just friends. They’ve been joined at the hip since I’ve known them, though, so I get the confusion.”

“Oh,” says Johnny. He frowns and eats a chip. “I saw them at Avec, and I just sort of assumed.”

Patrice smirks. “Yeah, Looch told me. He said you were a real hero, keeping him out of trouble like that.”

“Oh gross, he did not,” Johnny says, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t really do anything.”

“Well no, he didn’t actually say that,” Patrice admits. “But he did say you were cool and that he was being kind of a dumbass, which are both things I believe.” He sighs.

“Most of my teammates need ‘round the clock babysitters,” Johnny says consolingly. “I get it. But it really wasn’t that bad, and I think the MTL guys started it.”


Someone pounds on the front door, a full-blown police knock, and they both jump.

“Uh,” says Johnny.

Patrice rolls his eyes. “That’ll be Segs. Go find a seat in the living room, we’ll be right behind you.”

Johnny takes the chips and disappears in the direction of the den, still wearing a vaguely concerned look, and Patrice hurries for the front door as the pounding starts back up again.
“Christ,” he shouts, throwing the door open and nearly getting Segs’ fist in his face, still poised mid-knock. “You couldn’t just ring the fucking doorbell like a normal person?”

Segs smiles beatifically, breezing in past Patrice and handing him a sixer of cherry Cokes. “I just wasn’t sure you’d answer, you know, seeing as how you keep blowing me off lately.”

“Oh, bullshit,” says Patrice, forcibly tamping down a prickle of guilt as he stuffs the Cokes into the fridge. “You’re the one who’s late because he had a date in the middle of Saturday afternoon. Who the hell does that, anyway?”

“People who don’t want to get caught by their girl’s parents,” says Segs wisely. Patrice snorts. “Play on, player.”

“I will, thank you,” Segs says. He grins, reaching around Patrice to grab one of the Cokes.

Patrice eyes him. “Speaking of parents, mine will be home around seven, dude. Don’t you dare try to spike that.”

“Killjoy,” mutters Segs. He pops the can and takes an obnoxiously loud gulp, but follows Patrice docilely enough to the living room.

In hindsight, Patrice kind of gets why someone might think Davy and Looch are a couple, the way they’re piled onto the loveseat together, sharing a blanket. Johnny is across the room in an armchair, looking patently out of place, and Marchy breaks off halfway through a rant about Taco Bell to bump Segs’ fist with his own and steal the Coke.

“Is this not spiked?” he asks, pulling a disappointed face. “Lame, bro.”

“Bergy’s a fun-ruiner,” Segs tells him dolefully, and Marchy toasts the sentiment.

“I regret knowing both of you,” says Patrice, but he steals the remote from Davy and flops down on the big couch between them both. Marchy elbows him companionably.

“I was just asking Toews here why his team sucks so bad,” he says, grinning wolfishly over at Johnny, who just glares levelly back.

“You realize Madison Tech won our last two matchups, right Marchy?” says Looch. “That big board at the rink with all the numbers is where they keep the score. You might want to look at it once in awhile.”

Johnny laughs, and then looks immediately unsure of the decision, shutting his mouth and hunkering down a little lower. “You guys are fun to play against,” he says, without inflection.

Segs looks like he’s about to snap back, so Patrice says, “Hey thanks, you guys, too,” before the bickering can start. “You guys wanna watch a movie or play games or what?”
March: Johnny

After exhaustive deliberation and bargaining, everyone finally agrees on a Halo matchup. Patrice and Segs team up against Davy and Looch for the first round, and then Davy reluctantly hands off his controller to Johnny while Marchy takes over from Segs.

Johnny relocates to the loveseat for his round so he can reach the controller, wedging himself in between Looch and the arm of the sofa. It’s not exactly comfortable, especially with how unimpressed Davy looks, but Looch just grins amiably and agrees to let Johnny take the sniping tower.

“Camper,” Marchy snorts, after his fourth re-spawn in as many minutes, and Johnny snickers in spite of himself.

“If you didn’t keep standing around down there switching out your weapons every ten seconds, we wouldn’t be having this problem,” Patrice mutters morosely.

“Yeah, Marchy,” Segs says, waggling his eyebrows. “Stop playing with your projectiles.”

Johnny lines up another shot, and Marchy swears loudly and sits back to wait for his guy to re-spawn. Looch holds up for a fistbump, and Johnny grins.

On Looch’s other side, Davy says, “Hurry the fuck up, I want another turn.” He doesn’t look up from where he’s dicking around on his phone, but he leans into it when Looch tugs him into a one-armed hug, and the tightness in his expression eases a little.

Doing his best to pretend like he’s not peripherally watching, Johnny’s just distracted enough to accidentally kill Looch with his next shot, instead of Patrice.

“Shit, shit, sorry,” he says, as Patrice, Marchy, and Segs all laugh their heads off and Looch swears. “You guys look too much alike!”

“I’m orange and he’s gray!” Looch groans. “Goddammit, Toews. I had a perfect record going this round, too.”

“Quit your whining, we’re still ahead,” Johnny snorts, knocking their knees together and grinning without taking his eyes off the screen.

Looch shoves back and Johnny elbows him, accidentally knocking the controller from his hand. Looch’s eyes narrow as he retrieves it.

“Hold my earrings,” he says to Davy, who snorts a laugh and takes the controller from him, leaning out of range as Looch and Johnny devolve into a tangle of elbowing and shoving.

“Are we still playing or what?” Marchy yells. “Fine, I’m just gonna pistol-whip you both to death, don’t mind me.”

Johnny yells back, “Don’t you dare, asshole!” But Looch has him pinned, giggling breathlessly as Johnny tries to shove him off, losing his controller in the scuffle.

“This is why I said teams would be a terrible idea,” says Davy, placidly. Around Looch’s shoulder, Johnny watches as Davylobsa grenade at his stationary character and then takes off after Patrice and Marchy.
“Traitor,” Johnny grumbles, and Davy smiles beatifically. “Move, fucker, I can’t breathe.”

“You should have thought of that before picking a fight above your weight class,” Looch says, grinning and repositioning to flatten Johnny against the arm of the couch even more. Johnny shoves back, kneeing him in the hip and sending them both sliding to the floor in a heap.

“Don’t break anything,” Patrice says, beginning to sound legitimately concerned. “Or each other.”

Johnny finally gets an arm free, using it to prod Looch in the side, just under his ribs. It’s reflex left over from wrestling with David growing up, finding that one vulnerable ticklish spot, and it works just as well now. Looch gives a slightly hysterical yelp, flinching back just enough for Johnny to scoot out from under him and hop to his feet with a grin.

“Good effort, kid,” Johnny tells him, smoothing the hair back off his sweaty forehead and straightening out his shirt where it’s all twisted around his middle. “Anyone want anything from the kitchen? I need something to drink.”

“I could use another Coke,” says Marchy.

“The Coke I got for myself that you stole and drank while I was playing, you mean,” Segs mutters, and Marchy sticks his tongue out at him.

“I’ll just grab a few,” says Johnny, heading for the kitchen before deliberation can continue.

He’s not good at being the odd man out; not good at being outnumbered. Not that Patrice’s guys are terrible people or anything -- he vows never to tell Shaw (or anyone ever, probably) how he actually sort of enjoys Marchy, and Looch seems surprisingly chill off the ice, which he’s pretty sure none of his guys would believe, anyway -- but he can’t help feeling like a stranger here. Segs’ apparent refusal to look at or really acknowledge him doesn’t help, nor do Davy’s less than subtle calculating, sidelong glances.

And he gets it, he does. He’s on their turf, in their space, a spectator to their comfortable little rituals and in-jokes.

“Hey.”

Johnny startles, turning from where he’d been spacing out, staring blankly into the open fridge for who knows how long. Looch is standing in the kitchen doorway, still looking a bit rumpled, but expression sober.

“Oh hey.” Johnny shuts the fridge, moving aside. “You need something? Sorry, I was just zoning out.”

Looch shakes his head. “Nah man, I’m good. You were just gone awhile so I wanted to make sure we’re like, cool or whatever. I was just messing around back there.” He jerks his head to indicate the living room, and Johnny laughs.

“Yeah, we’re cool,” he says. “I grew up fighting my little brother over game controllers and, like, everything we could come up with.”

“Cool,” says Looch. He grins broadly, but doesn’t make a move to leave.

Johnny smiles awkwardly back, not really sure what to say next before he remembers, “Oh shit, the Cokes.” He returns to the fridge, digging out the remainder of the 6-pack and taking one for himself. “You want one?”
Looch says, “I’m good,” but he doesn’t move, shifting foot to foot before finally blurting, “Do you want to maybe go out sometime?”

Johnny’s so surprised, he says, “Yeah, okay,” before even fully registering the question. “Like, you mean, a date or whatever?”

“Or yeah, I mean, whatever,” Looch nods, and he can’t seem to meet Johnny’s eyes anymore. He’s so tall, the bashful kid thing would be comical if it didn’t look so sincere.

Johnny doesn’t let himself think. “Yeah,” he says again, firmer this time. “Yeah, I’d like that. Like, maybe Avec or something?”

A date. He and Pat hadn’t even really dated, so much as they’d gone out with groups of their friends and used any limited alone-time to fool around. Johnny doesn’t even know if he’s sure how dates are supposed to work.

But Looch seems funny, and smart, and he’s not exactly Johnny’s usual type, but he seems comfortable in his bones in a way most guys Johnny knows, himself included, haven’t quite figured out yet. Then again, Johnny’s pretty sure that if he’d looked like a human Humvee at sixteen, he wouldn’t have been super self conscious, either. Tall, dark, and the opposite of anything Johnny’s familiar with, it’s kind of a huge turn-on.

Yeah, Avec,” Looch agrees quickly. He looks relieved. “You wanna meet there on Thursday at like, eight or something?”

“Sounds good,” says Johnny. “I could, like, pick you up or whatever, if you want.”

Looch’s cheeks flush dark, but he shakes his head. “Thanks, but, um. The less I have to explain to my parents the better, if you don’t mind.”

Johnny grimaces sympathetically. “Got it. No worries, man.”

He drops the sodas on the coffee table in front of Patrice, Segs, and Marchy, before resuming his seat in the armchair across the room. Now that they’re...what? Dating? Going on a date, anyway. Johnny feels a little weird about just cramming back in next to Looch on the loveseat, especially since Davy has strategically repositioned to sit cross-legged and take up as much space as possible in the time Johnny and Looch were up.

The invitation had been such a surprise, Johnny hadn’t even really thought much about the details. Such as, how Patrice might react to Johnny dating one of his teammates. Or the odds that Davy will be at all supportive, and not inclined to pour sugar into Johnny’s gas tank.

Looch is apparently less concerned. He smiles at Johnny as he tugs on coat and sneakers in the front hall a couple of hours later, cheeks going a little pink as he says, “See you Thursday, yeah?”

Davy looks up sharply where he’s lacing his shoes, but Johnny just grins back and says, “Yeah, definitely.”

“Cool,” says Looch. His cheeks are flushed and bright, but he juts out his chin defiantly as Davy impatiently jangles keys, bumping Patrice’s fist and finally turning and following Davy out to the car.

Patrice shuts the door after them and glances to make sure Segs and Marchy are still occupied being loud and obnoxious at each other over another round of Halo before raising his eyebrows.

“So you and Looch are...hanging out?” he asks, delicately. There’s the hint of a smirk haunting the
corners of his mouth.

“We’re going on a date, to Avec,” Johnny says, bland as he can manage with Patrice leering at him like that. “Is that cool? With you, I mean.”

Patrice snorts a laugh. “Why wouldn’t it be? Nah, I think it’ll be good for both of you, if you can manage to get your heads out of your respective asses for it.”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?” Johnny demands, but Patrice just laughs again and cuffs him on the shoulder.

“It means you guys deserve each other. But hey. I’m all for anything that’ll maybe get that kid to loosen up a little on the ice. He’s too fucking good to spend every goddamn game hanging out in the penalty box. They might as well get him a mini fridge and some comic books or something.”

--

Thursday arrives with little fanfare, in the midst of pre-playoff frenzy.

By the time they’ve gotten done with the week’s fourth extra-long practice, followed by another of Seabs’ increasingly frantic lectures, Johnny could not be more relieved for the excuse to go out. Relieved, and completely at a loss, figuring out how the hell this even happened. How he agreed to it. How it somehow doesn’t seem like the worst idea ever. And how it’s weirdly comforting that Milan spends the first forty minutes talking almost non-stop over the heavy pulse of music about David fucking Krejci.

“You could have brought him, you know,” Johnny says, after the third effusive soliloquy on Krejci’s prowess at the faceoff dot.

Which, yeah. Johnny is aware. It’s kind of really frustrating during their matchups.

Looch blushes. Johnny can see it bloom over his cheeks even under the low, orangey lights.

“Shit, sorry. We can talk about something else! Anything, man. Are you into fantasy leagues or anything? I’m killing it in my fantasy basketball league right now.”

It’s charming. Or, it’s actually sort of ridiculous, but Johnny’s charmed in spite of the ridiculousness. He takes a pause, takes a breath, and reaches for Looch’s hand where he’s got it resting on his knee between them. Quickly, before he can think too hard about it.

He says, “Dude, hey, it’s cool. I uh. I know it’s not the same, but my breakup a few months ago fucking sucked, and even so, like, I still want to talk about him all the time. Sometimes I feel like he’s all I know how to talk about, you know?”

“Yeah.” Looch nods with a little smile, glancing over at Johnny through long, heavy eyelashes. “Yeah. I guess Bergy told you, huh? With his big fucking mouth.”

“If he hadn’t, the last half hour or so probably would’ve tipped me off,” Johnny shrugs, grinning. “It’s fine, though. I told you, I get it.”

Looch glances away with a low, frustrated noise, but his fingers curl around Johnny’s where Johnny still has a hand on his. “That doesn’t mean— I mean. When I asked you out, or whatever. I really meant it.”

“Yeah,” Johnny agrees. “Me, too.”
They sit in silence for a moment or two, awkward and tense; static in contrast to the frenetic hustle of bodies all around them, stirred along by the ebb and flow of thundering club beats.

“So,” Looch says at last, just when Johnny’s starting to consider reclaiming his hand and suggesting they maybe head out. “Seen any good movies lately?”

Johnny laughs. “I...don’t think so? I honestly can’t remember the last time I went to a movie theater. Is that sad?”

“Kinda, yeah,” says Looch. He grins, and Johnny grins back, and leans in a little, and Looch mirrors him. The fingers of his free hand come up to curl in the short hairs at the back of Johnny’s neck as they kiss.

There’s no desperation or fumbling, but it’s nice. It’s soft, and Johnny likes the way Looch’s lips part so quickly for him, and the way he worries Johnny’s lower lip with his teeth when things get slow and lazy and deep. The loud music, the lights, all of it gets pushed back to the periphery in favor of the two of them on their low, saggy couch.

Minutes, or possibly hours later, Looch pulls back first. He checks his phone and swears.

“Shit,” he groans, breath warm against Johnny’s cheek. Johnny strongly considers turning his head for another kiss. He’s half hard in his jeans, and his nice, private truck is right outside in the parking lot, but Looch’s grumbling brings him back to reality. “I have to take off in like three minutes if I’m gonna catch the last bus home.”

Johnny sits back, frowning. “Dude, let me give you a ride. You’re over by Bergy, right? It’s seriously not that far out of my way.”

“I, um.” For the first time, Looch looks decidedly awkward. “Look, man. Don’t take this the wrong way, but you have kind of a reputation, and if my parents see me in a car with you there are going to be a lot of really gross, stupid questions. You know what I mean?”

“Not...really,” Johnny says slowly, even though this isn’t entirely true. “They wouldn’t be cool with you getting a ride from me, but Bergy or Krejci are okay?”

“Bergy and Krej are on my team, and neither of them have reputations for openly dating dudes.” Looch looks so pissed saying it, that Johnny’s saved the trouble of a righteously indignant outburst. Instead, he just sighs.

“Yeah, okay. That kind of sucks, though. For you, I mean.”


Looch is quiet for a long moment, staring down at his lap, at the dance floor, at the bar, at anything but Johnny, and this is so far outside the realm of anything Johnny’s used to, he just lets the silence stretch. He forgets sometimes what a safe little bubble he gets to live in, with outspoken support coming everywhere from his parents to his team to his school. It’s been that way since ninth grade, and he’d never even bothered to question it, beyond maybe finding what now seems like the audacity to gripe about all the attention. How he’d never signed up to be anybody’s poster child.

“Your parents really know who I am?”

Looch gives him a look. A sort of smirk that curls up the corners of his mouth and leaves Johnny wanting to kiss him again. “Buddy, anyone who pays attention to high school hockey in the tri-county area knows who you are.”
Johnny elbows him and Looch laughs, jostling him back.

“Fine,” Johnny says. “So then I’ll give you a ride and just drop you off far enough away so they don’t see me. Down the street or whatever.”

“Okay, okay,” Looch says, after a moment’s consideration. “But don’t think I don’t know what this is, some slick move to get me in your truck and take advantage of me.”

“Slick and subtle,” Johnny agrees earnestly, and grins when Looch cracks up. “Come on, I’ll get you home before you turn into a pumpkin.”

He reaches for Looch’s hand again, and together they wend their way through the stuffy interior and out into the cold, crisp night.
April: Geno

“So,” Patrice says, around a mouthful of ice cream cone. He fidgets, swiveling back and forth on his stool until Geno sticks a leg out to catch him, hooking their ankles together. Patrice smiles. “What’re we gonna do about playoffs?”

“What do you mean?” asks Geno.

Patrice fixes him with a level stare. “Uh, I mean, we’re matched up first round. What’re we gonna do?”

“Oh,” says Geno. “Yes, I wonder about that, too. I think maybe we both quit hockey, join marching band. I could learn tuba, and maybe you be good at tambourine.”

“Okay…” Patrice takes another bite of ice cream. “But then what happens when Consol and Causeway meet at Battle of the Bands later this spring? We’ll be right back where we started, and anyway, have you seen Causeway’s uniforms? No way could I pull off that hat.”

“Fine,” says Geno, tragically. “Fine. I guess that it, then. Time for us both to run away and become figure skaters.”

“No!” Patrice yelps. He loses his balance on the stool, falling into Geno and burying his face in Geno’s neck, giggling. “No. Oh my god, that’s your worst plan ever.”

“Then maybe it’s time for you to start help planning,” Geno says.

Patrice plants a smacking kiss next to Geno’s ear in retaliation, making him yelp as he gives Patrice a gentle push back toward his stool.

Patrice glances around, blushing. “Sorry,” he murmurs. “Sorry, I wasn’t thinking.”

Geno waves him off, but swipes the ice cream cone from him, taking a large mouthful. “Is fine, nobody here to see.” He looks around at the mostly-empty cafe, strategically chosen on the far side of Madison township.

“Still.” Patrice looks pained, dark eyes in an olive-pale face. Geno reaches for his hand, under the counter and out of sight, and after a moment’s hesitation, Patrice takes it. “I don’t want to get you in trouble, G.”

“Only trouble I worry about right now is trouble on ice when Consol hand Causeway your butts on Friday,” Geno says. He grins, big and toothy, and is rewarded by Patrice sticking out his tongue and stealing his ice cream back.

“You wish. Hasn’t anyone ever told you, ice cream is for winners.”

“Maybe I stop buying it for you, then,” says Geno. “Stop giving you ideas.”

“Between you and me, I don’t think I’m the one with delusions of grandeur here,” Patrice says, haughtily. He beams around a mouthful of Dutch chocolate.

Geno has the decency to wait to tackle him until they’re outside, straight into a hedge.

All chirping aside, playoffs are, at last, a reality.
Fresh off a shift, Geno watches from the bench as Patrice tears up the ice toward Consol’s net. He takes a pass at the line from Marchand and drops to Seguin, hot on his heels, taking full advantage of Consol’s terrible change with nothing but Tanner Glass in between them and Flower.

Coach is yelling, “Fuck, fuck!” behind him on the bench, and other guys are shouting. Geno’s ears are ringing.

Glass tries to move in, tries to intercept, but Patrice just scoots sideways and takes possession again off Marchand’s deflected pass, rocking back for the shot. It’s that split second where the whole arena draws breath, physically sensing a goal waiting to happen.

And then, out of nowhere, Kris Letang.

Geno had been so focused watching the puck down low that he doesn’t even see Tanger until he’s there, breaking Patrice’s clean line to the net and forcing him to shift and pass back to Marchand at the last second. It’s a clean hit; a juggernaut move, the definition of which is driven home an instant later when he plows straight into Patrice without slowing.

They both go down in a heap in the same breath that Marchand takes the redirect and, mercifully, misses, sending it up over the net to ricochet off the glass. The ringing plok it makes immediately followed by the collective heaving groan of the crowd neatly covers up whatever choice expletives come out of Marchand’s open mouth.

The whistle blows as the ref helps untangle Tanger and Patrice. Tanger skates back to the bench easily, fistbumping a couple of the guys and nodding to Geno, who nods back and tries not to seem too obvious about noticing how long it takes Patrice to get back to his feet.

Once he’s up, though, he seems fine. He brushes himself off and skates back to the bench so that Krejci kid can swap him out taking the resuming faceoff.

Geno thinks he might puke his heart up between his skates.

He’s relieved a moment later when Coach yells, “Malkin! Move it!” and he gets to hoist himself back over the half-boards and take off after the puck.

The score stays tied at 2-2 through the second frame and into the third, and Geno is too concerned with trying to bump Consol into the lead to think about much else until the next time he and Patrice are facing off.

Even if he didn’t know Patrice personally, even if they were still just rival centermen spending the last couple of years fighting over a puck, Geno would still have noticed something off in Patrice’s play. He’s not limping or stiff or anything, but he loses the faceoff and then it’s like he’s being held back by some invisible force; fighting for the puck when it comes close, but waiting for it to come to him. Hanging back on the play, and lagging behind when ordinarily he would lunge ahead.

Geno thinks, *Maybe he’s just tired. It’s been a rough game.*

He thinks, *Maybe I’m just imagining things.*

Then Patrice falls and he doesn’t get up. He just sits there with his head between his knees, shoulders heaving under their pads, and Geno thinks, *Nope. Not imagining things.*

Geno’s the closest to him and the first to reach him, losing his gloves and dropping to his knees, skidding the last couple feet to land next to Patrice.
“What wrong? What matter?” he says, trying to get a look at Patrice’s face where he’s curled in on himself. He wants touch him, or-- or something. He wants to reassure himself that Patrice is okay and still in one piece; simultaneously afraid to get that close, afraid of how wrong he could be.

Patrice looks queasy and greenish around the ears, in those small parts of him that Geno can actually see, but he just shakes his head slightly and mutters, “Fine, G, I’ll be fine. Just gimme a sec.”

By this time, though, Marchand has caught up to them, elbowing Geno unceremoniously out of the way and saying, “Dude, Bergy, what the fuck, man? What’s up?”

Another Causeway kid, some tiny, freaked-out looking defenseman, looks on with huge eyes as the ref and Causeway’s coach join them, and Geno reluctantly shuffles away and gets back to his feet. It only then occurs to him to glance around for his own guys, and the first thing he sees is Sid, standing at the bench and looking like Geno just punched him in the face. Sid is followed by a row of expressions ranging between confused, annoyed, and, in Glasser’s case, gleeful. Causeway’s whole bench is glaring daggers.

Patrice is helped off the ice by his assistant coach, and they disappear down the hall to the dressing rooms together. The game resumes, and Geno plays out his shifts through the last eleven minutes in a haze.

Glasser scores, and a couple minutes later that’s that, they’ve won, and Geno is being crushed in a group hug of sweaty, whooping guys. He punches Sid in the shoulder and takes a noogie from Flower before he’s finally able to slip off to the side, skating over to where Causeway’s guys are filtering dejectedly back toward the hall.

Seguin’s one of the last, and Geno skids to a stop, grabbing his arm. “Hey, Pa-- Bergeron. He okay? You know?”

Seguin gives him a look bordering on disgust. “What the fuck, man, I don’t know. He hasn’t been back out. Why do you care, anyway?”


Seguin looks like he’s about to retort, but Marchand joins them before he can, skating up and putting a hand on Seguin’s arm like a preemptive blocking maneuver, should he try to lunge. It might be funny if there weren’t precedent. Or if Geno weren’t so worried.

“Hey,” Marchand says, glancing between them. “What’s up?”


Marchand’s eyes linger just a second too long on Geno with a knowing sort of look that reminds him a little of Fleury. He says, “Hold on, I’ll go check. I’m sure he’s fine,” and skates back over to the bench. Seguin glares irately at Geno, but doesn’t say anything.

The Causeway coach is talking to their goalie and Marchand has to wait around for a moment. He only says a few words that Geno can’t hear, pointing in the direction of the lockers and then at Geno, but whatever he hears in reply is visible in the sudden set of his shoulders, the way he nods and turns and hurriedly skates back over. Geno’s stomach drops.

“An ambulance picked him up fifteen minutes ago,” he says, but he’s looking at Seguin now, who
goes instantly pale to the roots of his sweat-spiked hair. “He’s at Saint Mary’s. We need to go.” He glances at Geno and adds, “Sorry.”

They’re both off the ice and disappearing down the hall before Geno can organize the words to respond. He waffles for about three seconds before following.

The Consol guys are still back on the ice, bouncing around and celebrating in the stands with excited parents and friends, so he finds the visitor’s locker room mercifully empty. He drops onto a bench and tugs his skates off, stuffing them along with the rest of his gear into his bag, and pausing just long enough to tug on some jeans before bolting for his car in the back parking lot.

He’s still soaked in sweat, hair dripping down the back of his neck as he pulls onto the road, and when he catches a glimpse of himself in the rearview mirror, he winces. Thanks for that elbow to the face, Lucic. His nose had really not needed that. He beelines for the hospital anyway, only realizing the gaping holes in this plan as he’s pulling into the E.R. visitor lot.

He’s not family. He’s not even really a friend, so far as anyone but probably Patrice knows. His English isn’t great, and it’s even worse when he’s under pressure.

Then he remembers Patrice’s face as he went down.

Geno wipes the last vestiges of dried blood from around his nose and squares his shoulders and enters through the automatic sliding emergency room doors, hit with a blast of overheated, sterile-smelling air. It takes a second of looking, but he spots Marchand and Seguin posed in similar states of disarray to his own next to Patrice’s anxious-looking mom and dad.

“Hi,” he says, awkward and wrong-footed, standing in front of the row of them. Patrice’s parents looks less surprised than he thinks they should, while Marchand’s eyebrows flirt dangerously with his hairline. Seguin glowers, his hands in fists at his sides. “Patrice okay?”

“He’s having a-- a scan thing. An MRI?” Marchand says, glancing at Patrice’s dad, who nods. “Yeah. To see what happened.”

“They said they think it’s his ribs,” Mrs. Bergeron says, and the words soften around her accent, so it’s a moment before Geno even notices the tension they send sweeping through him. “Have a seat,” she adds, with a kind, worried little smile. Geno recognizes that smile; he knows that smile.

“Thank you,” he says, trying not to sound as stiff as he feels, even as fresh, aching waves of worry threaten to seep into his voice. The only chair left in their row is on the end, next to Marchand, and he takes it, extremely aware of the mutinous glances Seguin is shooting his way.

“He’s from Consol,” Seguin says loudly, to no one in particular. Geno has plans to punch this kid so hard, next time they’re not all flipping out about something important.

Someday very soon, Geno is going to have a conversation with Patrice about what the fuck he sees in this guy.

“Yeah,” he continues. “He’s the one Patrice fought on the ice a few months ago.”

Marchand shifts between them, muttering a warning, “Ty,” but Seguin ignores him.

Someday very soon, Geno is going to have a conversation with Patrice about what the fuck he sees in this guy.

Patrice’s dad glances down the row at them, and Geno says hurriedly, “Was misunderstanding,” with a scathing look over at Seguin. “Stay on ice. Your son good guy, good player.”

“Good English tutor, too, apparently,” Mr. Bergeron says, with a wry little smile at Geno, who feels
his face go hot.

“What?” Seguin says, but this time Marchand grabs his arm.

“Dude, Ty, cool it,” he hisses quietly, and this time Seguin harrumphs, settling back in his seat and looking anywhere but at Geno.

They’re there for what feels like days, but is probably more like two hours.

Seguin and Marchand distract themselves with some game on their phones, and the Bergerons murmur quietly between themselves in Quebecois. Geno sits and tries not to fidget or freak out or think.

Mr. Bergeron breaks the silence once to say, “We probably don’t need to be terribly worried. He was awake and talking when they brought him in.”

Tyler nods, and Marchand shrugs with a, “Yeah, he’s gotten banged up before,” and objectively Geno knows these things are true. They play hockey, it’s rough, they get banged up, they recover. It’s part of the deal. He gets it. But at the same time, there’s this entirely new sensation of an icy weight sitting in his core, seeping through him and pulling him down along with his sense of reason.

He finally pulls out his phone to distract himself, only to find a growing mass of texts from teammates basically amounting to WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU COACH IS GOING TO MURDER YOU, and one from Fleury that just says lol with a weird little emoji of two aliens holding hands.

Geno responds to Flower with wtf?? and instantly gets back lololololll traitor ;), followed quickly but Sid says where the hell are you. So does everybody else.

Geno shuts his phone off and stuffs it back into his pocket.

They don’t have to wait much longer. A doctor comes out and Patrice’s parents get up to talk with her, coming back a few minutes later looking relieved.

“Just a rib fracture,” says Mrs. Bergeron, and from the corner of his eye Geno sees Seguin slump down in his chair. Marchand breathes out a whooshing sigh. “They’re keeping him overnight, but he’ll be home in the morning. We’re going to fill out the admission paperwork and stay the night with him, so you boys should go home. Thanks for staying.” She’s looking at Geno as she says the last part, and she smiles.


She nods. “Sure.” And Geno takes that as his cue to head for the doors, past Seguin who looks like he just got high-sticked in the face, and a smirking Marchand.

Just as he’s getting into bed, trying not to think about how he’s going to be getting up in three and a half hours to open the restaurant, his phone buzzes on the nightstand. He’d turned it back on when he got home to send out a mass-text to everyone who’d been barraging his inbox, EVERY1 CLAM DOWN. WILL B @ PRACTICE ON SUN. NO WORRYING., and he grumbles as he rolls over to grab it, ready to tell Flower to seriously just go the fuck to sleep.

Instead, he see’s Patrice’s number.

mom and dad said you waited with them. thanks. sorry segs is a douche.
Geno grins, feeling lighter than he has in hours.

*Is fine. I knock him into boards next game. Maybe shake up, fix brain.*

He gets back *lol b nice. srsly tho, thanks. c u soon?*

At least Patrice is conscious and texting, and doesn’t seem like he’s in any kind of unbearable agony. Geno returns with *You see me soon. You ok tho?*

*yeah fine comes back. just sore. got the good drugs. gotta sleep now. xx*

Geno stares at the screen until it goes black. He falls asleep still clutching his phone.
Patrice is dreaming about Geno when the racket starts.

Dreaming, or maybe drowsy wishful thinking, that Geno is curled up on the couch with him. The idea of Geno is warm and steady, and a safe, solid presence when everything in Patrice’s reality aches, and sucks, and is really, really loud.

“Oh my god,” he groans, turning to bury his face deeper into the pillow. He’s rewarded by a sharp pain that shoots up his whole left side, finishing the job of jarring him rudely and abruptly awake that the noise had started. “I was sleeping.”

“Sorry,” says Marchy, going still in the doorway and adopting the demeanor of someone entering a funeral home. “Sorry, sorry. We texted, but you didn’t answer, so we rang the doorbell, but I think your mom was out back. She just let us in, and then Davy knocked over your sticks next to the front door.”

“Sorry,” says Davy, craning around Marchy. “Seriously, man, my bad.”

“Ugh,” says Patrice. His mouth is dry and cottony, and there’s a glass of water on the coffee table next to him. He starts the very slow, very careful process of sitting up in increments so he can very slowly and very carefully reach for it.

“Dude, let me get that.” Marchy brushes businesslike past Davy, holding out the glass for Patrice and perching on the edge of the coffee table to examine him. “So. The doctor said broken ribs?”

Davy settles on the loveseat next to the couch, and Looch follows quietly in his wake.

“Fractured,” Patrice corrects, gingerly shifting to sit all the way up and taking a grateful gulp of water. “Three of them, yep. Ugh, these pain pills they have me on give wicked dry mouth. Yuck.”

“Any word on how long until you can play again?” Marchy asks, with the would-be nonchalant air of someone who spent the ride over rehearsing. Patrice looks away, studying the glass between his hands.

“I dunno,” he says, quietly. “Awhile.”

“How long is ‘ awhile’?” Davy demands, and Looch whacks him on the arm.

“Dude.”

“Shut up.” Davy waves him off, all business. “We’re tied one game apiece with Consol, we have game three on Monday night, and our captain has three broken -- sorry, fractured -- ribs. We have to figure shit out.”

“I’m sorry,” Patrice says. His voice cracks. He hates that he can’t move easily, can’t turn so they don’t see his face. “There’s a chance I could come back in the final round, if we make it, but they couldn’t say for sure last night. Shit, guys, I’m so sorry.”

“Why the hell are you sorry?” Looch demands, suddenly. He seems to take up more space, leaning
forward off the loveseat, eyes blazing. “Fuck that, I’m going to turn Letang into--”

“Don’t you fucking dare,” Davy and Patrice say in unison, and Patrice flinches when he hiccups a laugh.

Marchy cackles. “Oh, I dunno. Think you could make it look like an accident, Looch?”

“You mean like Letang did?” Looch says. He smiles, wide and sweet and terrifying. “Give me one shift.”

“Christ,” mutters Davy.

“Don’t do anything stupid, seriously,” Patrice demands, glaring up into Looch’s face. “I mean it. Take whatever clean hits you can, but you guys-- You guys still have a good chance of making it through to the finals without me. You should take it.”

Davy rolls his eyes. “Duh. I respect the hell out of you, dude, but I also really, really want that title. We can avenge you by getting even and winning in your name and shit.”

“And tearing Letang’s arms off and beating him with them,” Looch adds. “Shit, sorry, sorry!”

“Stop making him laugh,” Marchy snaps, reaching back to smack Looch’s leg. “Asshole.”

They fall into silence for a moment, Patrice carefully sipping his water and pretending not to notice the eyebrow conversation the other guys are having while his head is down.

Finally, Patrice asks, “So, uh. Segs couldn’t make it?”

More frantic eyebrow conversation.

“He, um,” Davy starts, but Marchy cuts him off, snorting derisively.

“He’s being a bag of dicks.”

Patrice looks up. “About..?”

Marchy fixes him with a level stare. “What the fuck do you think, jackass? Your boyfriend followed us to the hospital last night, and Tyler about hit the ceiling. I thought we were gonna have to call a code right there in the waiting room.”

“Geno mentioned, yeah,” Patrice says, quietly.

On the loveseat, Davy makes a sound like a teakettle boiling over, while Looch lets out a whoop.

“Are you kidding?” Looch shouts, completely ignoring Marchy’s quelling glare and Davy’s continued spluttering. “That big Russian guy, Consol’s captain? Is your boyfriend?”

“Um,” says Patrice. He hesitates, looking between the three of them. “Fuck. Yes, yeah, he is. Christ, Marchy, stop looking at me like that.”

“You knew?” Davy yelps, wheeling on Marchy with an expression torn between outrage and awe. “You knew, and-- Bergy, why the hell didn’t you tell anyone else?”

“This exact conversation seems like a good enough reason,” Patrice mutters, but nobody seems to hear him.
“He wanted to keep his personal life personal,” Marchy says, with almost indecent relish that completely negates his argument.

“I just didn’t want it to be a big deal,” Patrice says, loud enough that everyone else finally shuts up and looks at him. “I just...didn’t want it to be a thing. Especially going into playoffs, I figured we had enough to think about.”

“So instead you keep it a secret until you get hurt and your boyfriend completely flips out and blows your cover.”

Patrice glares at Davy, who just hikes his eyebrows and grins even bigger.

“I was going to tell you guys, eventually,” he says, to mingled eye-rolls and groans. “I mean it! It just-- The timing sucked, okay? And,” Patrice’s heart plummets, and he swallows dryly. “And his parents and family and stuff can’t find out, okay? Fucking promise me, you guys, I mean it. This is a big deal.” He stares at all of them.

Looch is the first to speak up. He sounds jarringly solemn as he says, “Yeah, man. Yeah, of course. We’ll make sure the rest of the guys know.”

Davy glances sidelong at him, frowning as he echoes, “Yeah, totally. We got you, Berg.”

Marchy nods.

“Thank you,” Patrice breathes, ignoring the twinge of pain as he sags back into the cushions. “Seriously, it’s really important.”


“So, you aren’t pissed?” he asks, hesitantly.

“That you didn’t tell us, or that you’re into dudes?” Davy asks.

Patrice shrugs. “Either? Both?”

“Uh,” says Looch. “Are you really asking me that?”

“Yeah,” says Davy. “I’m totally cool. I’m down. Some of my best friends are gay!”

Looch smacks him, and Davy makes a kissy face back.

“Yeah, but,” Patrice rolls his eyes, trying to force his foggy brain to make sense. “Looch, you’re...you. Your situation is--”

“Not very different at all, unless you count the oppressively orthodox religious family who would totally send me away to de-gayification camp for the rest of my life if they knew I was dating one of your bros? How did your parents take it, Patrice?”

Looch raises his eyebrows expectantly, and Patrice glances away, fidgeting with the empty water glass still in his hands. “Fine,” he says, still not looking up. “They want to have him over for dinner this week, so they can officially meet him.”

Marchy snorts a giggle. Looch says, “I always liked your parents.”

“It’s gonna be so embarrassing,” Patrice groans.
“Trade you for de-gayification camp.”

“I get it,” Patrice says. “I totally do, dude. I know I’m lucky, my parents are all progressive and cool and whatever. I just…” He trails off, wishing there were a less mortifying way to say any of this. “I wanted to just be *me* for awhile longer, you know? Not ‘the gay kid’ or ‘the gay hockey player’, or any of the stuff they were saying about Toews after freshman year.”

“Dude,” says Davy, quietly, “you *are* you. Who the fuck else would you be?”

“Actually,” Looch adds, “this is like, possibly even more you. Honestly, I wonder if anyone’s even going to be that surprised. Anyone who’s seen your collection of pastel skinny jeans, I mean.”

“Someone’s got maintain the stereotype for the rest of you,” Davy tells Looch wisely, snickering and squirming away when Looch pokes him in the side.

“I am not a stereotype,” Patrice grumbles. “You all suck, you’re terrible and unsupportive in my hour of need.”

“Hey, speaking of need,” Marchy says brightly, “you think you’re gonna have any of those pain pills left over?”

“How about I make it easy on you, and make it so you need a prescription of your own,” Patrice says, and Marchy cackles.

“Yeah? What, are you gonna beat me with your walker? You’d have to catch me, grandpa.”


“Speaking of,” says Looch, “we tried to get Tyler to come over here with us, man. He’s being a complete tool.”

“Dude,” hisses Davy, “you’re gonna make him all depressed and shit. We’re here to cheer him up.”

“Better us telling him than Bergy having to figure it out on his own that Ty got his head stuck up his ass again.”

Marchy nods in agreement. “Listen, man, I’ll talk to him, okay? I tried last night, but he was in one of his moods--”

“About what?” Patrice demands again. “That I’m gay, or that I didn’t tell him?”

Marchy winces. “I want to say more of the second one than the first one, and...That’s a good thing, right? I mean, you’re his best friend, he’ll totally get over something like that. How many times has he ditched us to sneak around with random girls?”

Patrice shrugs, and grimaces. “Sure, I guess.”

“He’s probably just surprised,” Davy says, consolingly. “When he gets over his shock, he’ll come around.”

“And then we’ll all take turns kicking the crap out of him for being a toolbag bigoted terrible friend,” Looch adds, brightly. “We’ll do it right here, so you can watch comfortably.”

Patrice laughs along with the rest of them, but it feels hollow. He’s relieved when Davy changes subjects.
“Hey, you guys wanna play XBox? Bergy, can you play? Would that hurt your ribs?”

Patrice manages to catch himself before shrugging. “Let’s find out.”

They spend the rest of the afternoon playing in relative peace, although Patrice can’t help himself checking his phone every few minutes.

He’s not sure who he’s anticipating more, Geno or Segs, but Geno has to work until late, and Segs is…

Segs is responding almost exactly the way Patrice had figured he would.

A part of him wants to call. Just get it over with and extend the olive branch, and start trying to make things feel like normal again. But another, darker part of him wants to drag it out; wants to make Segs be the one to make the first move, to apologize for being a douche before Patrice ever apologizes for keeping secrets in the first place.

After all, it’s Tyler pulling stuff like this that specifically made Patrice want to keep this from him in the first place, so why should he do all the work?

Later that night, Patrice makes his way gingerly up to bed, glaring at his phone screen in the dark until he finally caves, and hits send.

“H’lo?” Segs sounds groggy, even if it’s barely ten o’clock.

“Hi,” says Patrice, after hesitating.

There’s a long silence. Finally, Segs says, “What’s up?” in a would-be casual tone.

Patrice snorts. “Seriously? My parents told me you spent all last night waiting for me in the E.R., then Marchy and Davy and Looch all come over to hang out today and tell me you blew them off, and you ask me, ‘what’s up’?”

“Yeah?” Segs has the defensive, hurt tone that gives Patrice flashbacks of fourth grade on the playground. Of the fierce look Segs always got when the older kids tried to challenge their rights to the swing set. “What, d’you want me to ask about your boyfriend?”

He makes the word sound ugly, or maybe that’s just how Patrice feels. About himself, about the situation, about how humiliatingly grateful he is that he doesn’t have to see Segs’ face right now.

“I should’ve told you,” Patrice says, quietly. He doesn’t mean to, but the words slip out, and hang in the dead air between them. It’s quiet for so long that Patrice finally asks, “You there?”

“Yeah,” says Segs. He clears his throat, and there’s a sound like shifting blankets. “You should’ve told me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You told Marchy, man. Why couldn’t you have told me, too?”

“He asked,” says Patrice. “I didn’t think you wanted to know.”

The line goes silent again, but this time Patrice can make out the tiny, distant sounds of breathing. Segs says, “It’s just...weird.”

“Why?”
“Because it’s you?” Segs says, simply. “Because I’ve known you forever, so I guess I just figured…”

“I’m still me,” says Patrice. He’s tearing up again, he hates it. There’s no comfortable way to lie down and still be able to wipe his face, and his phone is getting all wet.

“Do you love him?” Segs blurts.

Patrice has to take a couple of deep breaths before he says, “I...don’t know. We haven’t talked about that yet. But I-- I like him a lot.”

“How long?”

“How long have I liked him?”

Segs makes an exasperated noise, whooshing in Patrice’s ear. “How long have you been...I dunno. Don’t tell me gross details, dude. I just mean, all that shit with you guys fighting, and then...What even happened?”

“Gross details,” Patrice echoes, sardonically, and Segs gives another noncommittal whoosh of breath.

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” says Patrice, “I know this is why I didn’t say anything sooner. If we were talking about some chick, you’d be begging me for details by now.”

“God,” Segs bursts out, exasperated. “Sorry I’m not-- Not all perfect, or whatever. I’m not used to this shit, okay? I don’t know how to talk about it, or deal with it, so can you fucking be patient with me while I try, for you?”

“Generous of you,” Patrice says, drily.

“I’m sorry,” Segs says, again. “Really, I am. I wanna know, like, how long you’ve been together and stuff.”

“A few months,” says Patrice. He’s expecting the indignant chuh on the other end of the line. “I’m sorry, too, okay? I only told Marchy a couple weeks ago, and before that nobody knew, and I guess I liked it like that. Shit was so fucked up in the beginning, with us fighting and whatever. We just rubbed each other the wrong way or-- Oh, grow up! Do you want to hear this or not?” he demands, over Segs’ revolted noises.

“Sorry,” Segs says, but he sounds less convinced. “Yeah, go ahead.”

“Anyway,” Patrice resumes, with a warning tone. “We fought a bunch, but then it was like, I dunno. One night at a party it was like suddenly we’d spent so much time around each other, being pissed at each other for no real reason, suddenly he was an actual person. And we ended up talking for a few minutes, and then. And then he kissed me.”

Segs snorts incredulously. “Just like that?”

“Yeah? I guess.”

“He just kissed you. Without knowing if you were even into dudes, or into him, or anything?”

“It was more complicated than that,” Patrice says, frustrated. “I don’t know how else to explain it. I
“Knew what?” Segs demands, and Patrice seriously considers hanging up on him.

“I don’t know! That we both wanted the same thing? That we were both into it? I don’t know, how do you ever know when to mack on those drunk chicks you’re always talking about?”

“Uh, I think that’s a completely different--” Segs starts, but Patrice cuts him off.

“Yeah, you’d be surprised.”

Segs snorts a laugh. “You guys were drunk?”

“Not the first time we kissed,” Patrice says, thinking back. “Actually, we ended up punching each other that time, too. Shut up!”

“Sorry,” Segs says, still giggling. “Oh my god, this is some Degrassi-level shit, for real. You guys made out, and still beat each other up? Do I need to get you some hotline numbers, dude?”

“I hate you,” Patrice tells him. “This is another reason why I never should have told you.”

“I’m sorry!” Segs says, but he doesn’t sound it. “It’s just, are you hearing this? This is nuts! No way is this normal, even for--”

“Think really hard about how you want to finish that sentence,” Patrice says, warningly.

“--a weirdo like you,” Segs says, innocently. “That’s all I was gonna say.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But,” Segs persists, “you guys are like, cool now, and everything? No punching?”

“No punching,” Patrice says. “We’re cool.”

“Cool,” says Segs. He’s quiet for a second, then he says, “Malkin knows I’ll pound the shit out of him if he hurts you, right?”

Patrice bursts out laughing, in spite of himself. His ribs send painful twinges of complaint all up and down his side, but he can’t seem to stop.

“Ow,” he says. “Ow, fuck, ow, my ribs, you asshole!”

“I wasn’t kidding,” Segs grumbles, morosely. “I’ll seriously hand him his ass if he ever fucking--”

“Stop, stop,” Patrice begs, still giggling. “Seriously, man. That’s sweet and all, but maybe, like, hold off on the threats until you hit your growth spurt or something, yeah?”

“I hate you,” says Segs. You’re a really terrible friend.”

“Yeah,” says Patrice, lying back on his pillows and smiling up at the ceiling. “I guess we’re even.”

Chapter End Notes
Real talk, I think teenage high school AU Milan Lucic is legit my favorite character I've ever written.
When Pat breaks up with his girlfriend, Johnny hears about it from four separate sources in the space of a day. Or, rather, when Pat’s girlfriend breaks up with him, if Carbomb’s information in reliable. It usually is.

“Yeah,” Johnny says, picking over sandwich items in the lunch line. “I heard.”

“Did you hear that she dumped him in the middle of Bio?” Carbomb persists, dropping a chocolate milk apiece onto both their trays. He lowers his voice. “Something about how he’s still hung up on his ex, and she’s sick of watching him make goo-goo eyes at you during games and shit.”

Johnny stares at him.

“Smitty sits behind them, he overheard everything and told me during study hall,” Carbomb says.

“Okay,” says Johnny. He stares down at his tray without really seeing it.

“I just figured I’d tell you now, you know, so you didn’t get blindsided, or whatever,” Carbomb says. He leads the way to a corner table in the cafeteria, where Johnny collapses into his seat and toys disinterestedly with the plastic wrap on his sandwich.

“Thanks,” Johnny says, “but Krugs and Fro both told me after first period, and then Emery texted me, like, three minutes before lunch.” He sighs, and Carbomb shoots him a commiseratory grimace around a mouthful of chicken salad.

“Sorry.”

Johnny shrugs. “’s okay. I mean, sucks for Pat, I guess. Did Ben say if he was really upset?”

“Ben just said he got really quiet. I guess she went off at him right before the bell, and that was it.”

“Rough,” says Johnny.

“Yeah,” says Carbomb. He takes another bite of his salad.

Johnny unwraps his sandwich and picks off the tomato before taking a bite, more for something to do, than anything else. He says, “You think he’ll be okay to play tonight?”

Carbomb snorts. “Better fucking be. If we knock Scott Prep out of the first round tonight, that’ll buy us four extra days at least before we have to start round two, which we’ll probably need, if Scott keeps trying to turn us all into hummus like two nights ago.”

“Ugh,” Johnny agrees, rubbing bruised ribs. “Well, who knows. Maybe Pat’ll work through his feelings on the ice, or something.”

“Sure,” says Carbomb, toasting Johnny with his chocolate milk. “There’s a first time for everything, right?”

Johnny snorts into his sandwich.

“So, uh,” Carbomb says, after a few minutes’ quiet chewing. “Now that Pat’s single…”

“No,” says Johnny, vehemently.
“Seriously?” says Carbomb. “Not even a little?”

Johnny takes another bite, chewing and swallowing to buy time as he tries to formulate an answer.

“I mean,” he says, “yeah, I think about it sometimes. And I miss...stuff.” Johnny shrugs, glaring down at the remains of his food. “I still miss what I’d wanted us to be, does that make sense?”

“I...guess,” says Carbomb, slowly.

“I mean,” Johnny persists, “I think everybody saw us as this kind of, like, symbol. From the very beginning, just because administration and the parents and whatever made such a big deal about us. And that’s what I wanted us to be, too. Like, good together, you know?”

Carbomb raises his eyebrows. “You don’t think you guys were good together?”

Johnny just shrugs.

“You guys were kids when you got together,” Carbomb says, gently. “Like, little kids, even.”

“I know,” Johnny says. “I just wish...I dunno. I guess sometimes I wish we’d figured out how to be what we kept trying to be. I wish we’d been friends.” He laughs. “How fucked up is that? I was so in love with him for so long, and I don’t even know if I like him.”

“Again,” Carbomb says, “you guys were little kids. Anyone who expected you guys to be out shopping for rings is a fucking idiot.”

Johnny ducks his head, cheeks burning. “I always kinda thought maybe we’d go to the same college. Maybe things would go further, from there.”

“You were in love,” says Carbomb, simply. “I’m talking more about everybody else. You’re right, you guys were in the spotlight from early on, and I think you handled it better than Pat ever did. That kid is not great with pressure.”

“No shit,” Johnny says. He groans. “Ugh, why couldn’t she wait to dump his ass until after playoffs? Fuck.”

Carbomb laughs, reaching across the table to punch Johnny on the arm. “Hey, man. Apparently it’s your animal magnetism to blame. He just couldn’t keep his googly eyes off you and your mad skills.”

“Ugh,” Johnny says, again. “Ugh.”

Ironically, the breakup with Pat probably deserves credit for the highest-producing season Johnny’s ever had. He nets three, including one off a pass from Pat during the powerplay, and they sail to victory in the first-round series with Scott Prep with only moderate wear and tear.

Looch catches up with him in the parking lot after the game. Or rather, Looch is waiting for him, lurking in the dark near his truck when Johnny comes out.

There’s a crisp breeze tugging at Johnny’s fleece, but it’s lacking the knife-edge of real spring chill, like it can’t bother to sustain the effort and is just trying to keep up appearances. There’s a note of damp, too, that promises rain in the near future.

“Nice game, Captain Hat Trick.”

“Jesus,” Johnny yelps, dropping his gear onto the tarmac with a thunk as Looch emerges from the far
side of the cab. “What are you doing here?”

Looch shrugs. “We beat out Consol last night, so I decided to put the free time to good use and come scope out our potential competition for the final.”

He moves closer, and Johnny steps to meet him, hand settling on Looch’s hip. It’s weird, he doesn’t think he’ll ever be over looking up at the person he’s about to kiss, but here they are. Looch’s smile is fierce, and the dark hair falling over his eyes is blacker than the cloudy sky behind it. The whites of his eyes shine amber in the reflected light from the arena. Close to, Johnny is still struck every time by the strange, harsh beauty of him.

“Oh, is that it?” Johnny asks. “Just scoping out the competition.”

“Pretty much,” says Looch. He grins.


“Three fractured ribs take awhile to heal,” says Looch. “It sucks with him being out. Especially if you keep dominating the faceoffs like that, shit. Davy is gonna need to put in some extra practice.”

“Maybe we never mention that to him,” Johnny says, grinning. “But hey, you were watching me out there? Hot.”

Looch snorts, reaching up to brush Johnny’s damp hair back away from his face. “Of course I was. You’re hard to miss, dude.”

He’s already leaning down as Johnny leans up, last word swallowed by the kiss.

It’s quick, soft, and Johnny pulls back first, even as he has a more difficult time dislodging his hands from their comfortable resting places in the back pockets of Looch’s jeans.

“Sorry,” Johnny says. “Sorry, no PDA, I know. I wasn’t thinking.”

Looch laughs, a low rumble Johnny can feel where they’re still standing close.

“You see me telling you to stop?” He leans down and brushes another soft kiss over Johnny’s mouth. “My parents aren’t here, anyone else who might notice or say something aren’t here. My guys know, your guys know, so screw it. And you were really fucking hot tonight.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” says Looch, firmly, still grinning.

He leans back in, pressing Johnny against the tailgate of his truck, one hand curving up around the back of Johnny’s head to gently but deliberately tilt it back for better access.

The kisses are wet, deep, and hungry, and echo the driving force of him on the ice. Heavy and unrelenting, pushing straight through Johnny’s faltering defenses and dragging a low moan out of him that he’d maybe be embarrassed about if he had the presence of mind to bother.

Across the parking lot, the whipping breeze picks up snatches of laughter and shouting; some more of Johnny’s teammates, probably, filtering out to their cars to go off and celebrate the win. Johnny already begged off joining them, ignoring Shaw’s wheedling protests and Ray’s heckling.

“Traitor,” Ray had called him, and Johnny had rolled his eyes.
“Oh, please. Fuck right off.”

“It’s a lost cause,” Crow had told Emery, expression tragic. “He’s getting all old and boring and responsible.”

“I am not.” Johnny had rolled his eyes, chucking a towel at Crow, as he and Emery cackled at their own stupid humor. “I’m tired as shit, I’m behind in like, three classes, I’m gonna go home and crash early so I can actually get stuff done tomorrow.”

“Don’t front,” Emery called back. “We know you’re going out for private victory cellies with that Causeway boy of yours.”

This pronouncement had been accompanied by Crow’s Oooooooh, and across the room, Johnny had had a hard time missing how Pat stiffened at that, and dropped the skate he’d been messing with.

“Oooh,” Shaw had echoed, waggling eyebrows as Johnny groaned and refocused on packing his gear bag. “Yeah, look out what you say, guys. Johnny might sic his enormous boyfriend to beat your asses.”

“He is not my boyfriend, I keep telling you that,” Johnny had snapped, for all the good it ever did. “We’re just…”

“On each other like rabbits,” Shaw supplied helpfully. “Shit, man. If that’s not your definition of boyfriend, I don’t even wanna know what you and Kane got up to.”

To Johnny’s horror, Shaw caught Pat’s eye across the room and gave him a lewd wink. Pat’s face had been unreadable, meeting Johnny’s eyes for just a moment before turning hurriedly back to his gear. Johnny had swallowed hard, throat too constricted to voice a response.

“Hey, maybe it’s about time to shut the fuck up, huh?” Brandon had broken in, looping an arm around Shaw’s shoulders and beginning to herd him away. Johnny’s own sheer relief had made his skin crawl.

He can still see Pat’s inscrutable expression behind his closed eyes now, with Looch’s tongue in his mouth, and Looch’s big hands cupping his face. It’s almost fitting that it's Pat’s voice he hears next, calling over the wind and the rattle of gear bag wheels on pavement, down the row of empty parking spots and jarringly close.

“Dan, you said I could catch a ride with you, right?”

The sound of a trunk popping open, and then Carcillo’s voice. “Yeah, dude. I told you it’s cool. I made another mix CD, if you wanna listen to it on the way over.”

“No Decemberists?”

“No Decemberists, I promise.”

Johnny doesn’t realize he’s been standing stock still, or for how long, until Looch pulls back from kissing him and the cold air on his face snaps him back to himself.

“What?” Johnny asks, voice too low and furtive to fool anyone, even if Looch didn’t already have that knowing look.

Looch hikes his eyebrows, and darts his eyes significantly in the direction of Pat and Carcillo, now arguing about qualifying hipster criteria. Johnny shrugs evasively.
“Stuff with you guys still weird?” Looch says, keeping his voice low so Johnny has to lean back in to hear him.

“Stuff’s…” Johnny trails off, trying to think of the right, or any, words to sum up him and Pat on any given day. “It’s weird,” he says, at last. “And I guess, apparently he and his girl split up this morning.”

Looch lets out a low whistle. “No shit.”

“It sucks,” Johnny groans. “And everybody’s looking at me like...like, I dunno. Like I’m supposed to be doing something with this information. But it’s fucked up! It’s like, not even being on the same team anymore. I miss playing on a line with him, but then he’ll make some fucking petty comment or some shit, and I just want to beat his face in. I can’t even look at him half the time.”

“Awwww, poor league-leading team captain. How will you ever get through playoffs now?”

Looch laughs and yelps as Johnny cuffs him, and down the row, the bickering voices stop. The pit of Johnny’s stomach seizes up.

He can feel their eyes on him, on them, even if he refuses to turn his head and look. Looch is warm and solid against him, bracketing him against the truck, and not for the first time, Johnny wishes, wishes more than anything, that this could be enough for either of them. That they wanted to be more than just placeholders, friends with benefits, whatever.

He’s not thinking, doesn’t know what makes him move, but he pushes forward into Looch’s space again and kisses him. It feels like half desperation, half apology, but Looch falls back into him without missing a beat.

They kiss for what feels like hours, while Johnny drifts in a comfortable in-between place where he only distantly registers the long silence down the row, followed finally by the low, indiscernible thrum of Carcillo’s voice, prompting, and then the sounds of two car doors opening and shutting, and an old engine guttering to life.

When it’s just them again, Johnny says, “You wanna come over?”

Looch doesn’t seem to want to stop kissing him, humming, “Mmhmm,” against his mouth, before finally pulling back with a little frown. “But what about your parents?”

“Chaperoning a thing for David’s class. They’ll be gone ‘til like, sometime tomorrow afternoon, I think. I thought I told you?”

“You probably did,” Looch shrugs. “This week’s been crazy. Hang on, let me text the guys.”

“Did you have plans? How pissed at me is Krejci gonna be this time?” Johnny asks, with a smirk that Looch mirrors as he thumbs out a quick text.

“Eh, he’ll deal,” Looch says. “He had a date last weekend. Some chick from his Brit Lit class. He can shut his hypocrite mouth, if he wants to get on me for blowing him off tonight.”

Johnny snorts a laugh, finally opening the truck so they can both cram their stuff into the back and get in. The weather may be mild, but Johnny’s ears are beginning to feel a little raw nonetheless, and he’s grateful for the quiet, sheltered cab with its abundant heating vents.

While Johnny drives, Looch messes with his phone for a few minutes, finally shutting off the screen and pocketing it.
“Look,” he says, and something uncharacteristically sober in his voice makes Johnny glance over. “I know it’s not really my place, or whatever, but like, Why aren’t you and Kane together? You clearly still have feelings for each other, or there wouldn’t be all this…” Looch trails off, gesturing vaguely in front of him.

Johnny shrugs. “I told you, dude. We were just...bad. We didn’t talk about shit, we didn’t want the same things, except each other, I guess. We just sort of fucked and fought and skated. And then he cheated, so what the fuck else am I supposed to do? At least you and Davy are best friends. You guys are cool, and you get to skate on a line every day.”

Looch is quiet for a long moment, looking out the window before replying. “I guess you’re right. But you guys were both into each other. Davy’s my best friend, and hanging out all the time is great, don’t get me wrong. But knowing that that’s it, that’s how it’s always gonna be, kinda blows.”

“Ugh,” Johnny says. “Ugh, okay, yeah. I didn’t even look at it that way.”

“Eh, why would you?” Looch grimaces. “The grass is always greener, huh?”

Johnny says, “Yeah, I guess.” With a quiet laugh, he adds, “Wanna know something really lame?”

Looch nods.

“I’m pretty sure Pat being single, but not with me, might actually feel worse than Pat dating someone else. Even if I don’t really want us to get back together.”

Johnny’s own self-deprecating little snort of laughter echoes Looch’s, and he thunks his head back against the headrest behind him as they pause at a light.

“Man, we’re kind of revolting,” Looch says, as Johnny groans in agreement.

It’s a standing, unspoken rule that all talk of Krejci and Pat ceases once they start fooling around.

In the beginning, Johnny had said, “Look, I just. I don’t wanna use you,” and Looch had looked at him, long and hard and quiet with those steady, dark eyes.

He’d said, “How about we just use each other?”

Johnny had laughed in spite of himself, in spite of opening his mouth to protest, starting, “No, but we both--”

“It’s sex, not a marriage proposal,” Looch had interrupted, still with that level stare. “Now take your pants off.”

Johnny had winced and laughed and shut up.

“Want it on your back?” Looch mumbles now, against Johnny’s mouth as he backs Johnny toward the bed.

Johnny moans, already hard and leaking where he’s rubbing himself absentmindedly through his underwear.

“Want your mouth first, if that’s cool,” he manages, and feels Looch grin against his lips. He still feels weird asking for head like that, but Looch seems to border on indecent enthusiasm when it comes to going down on him.

Sure enough, he’s on his knees quicker than Johnny can draw breath, taking Johnny’s boxer briefs
with him and holding Johnny’s gaze through long, heavy eyelashes with a look so intentful it makes his knees a little weak.

Johnny forces himself to focus. Forces his mind not to wander, and to stay in the present. Here. Now. With his fingers tangling in straight, dark hair, and those big, steady hands firm around his thighs where they’re starting to shake.

Looch makes it easy for him. Works his mouth and plays his tongue until Johnny’s losing his mind a little, trying to stay standing. He never quite makes it all the way down, but he makes up for it with a couple fingers looped around the base of Johnny’s dick, adding some welcome pressure while his mouth makes a job of leaving wet, sucking kisses over the head. He works his tongue flat along the underside, lingering over the slit where he knows it’ll have Johnny pulling his hair and swearing, squirming, desperate, as Looch’s hands hold him fast and keep him close.

“Okay,” Johnny gasps, patting blindly for Looch’s shoulder. “Okay, okay, okay, c’mon, I don’t wanna come yet.”

Looch laughs around him and Johnny groans. “Not helpful, dude. Seriously.”

“Sorry I’m so good at doing how I do.” Looch smirks up at him, and gives his ass a smack. “You get more condoms?”

“There’s a new pack in the nightstand,” Johnny says, letting himself flop back on the bed, and kicking his underwear to the floor where they’d been still looped around an ankle. “Under all the charger cords and shit, toward the back.”

Looch opens the drawer, fishing around. He’s still in his button-down and boxers, and Johnny takes a moment to appreciate the strong, broad lines; the way every piece of him seems made with deliberate purpose. How it’s easy to forget how young he is.

Until, that is, he yelps and swears and grumbles, “Jesus shit, man, there’s something sharp in here. You think your mom won’t know exactly where to look if she wants to find your contraband?”

“Oh, sorry, that’s probably the sheriff’s badge Seabs got me when I got the C,” Johnny says. “And ugh, seriously, you wanna bring up my mom right after sucking my dick?”

Looch makes a face. “Ew, ew, okay, jeez, sorry,” he says, tearing open the box of condoms and looking down his prominent nose at Johnny with way more dignity than should be allowed.

“Anyway,” Johnny adds, deadpan, “I don’t have to hide stuff like that. She wants me to be safe. She actually bought them for me.”

Looch fumbles the box and swears, cuffing Johnny hard on the shoulder as Johnny cracks up.

“Dude, seriously? Gross!”

“No, not seriously,” Johnny says, still hiccuping laughs and enjoying the way Looch’s cheeks have gone all flushed. “But she does say all the time that she hopes I’m being safe, so I figure she’d just be, like, relieved or whatever, if she did find them.”

“Oh, for real we need to stop talking about your mom now, if I’m gonna keep it up,” Looch tells him. His cheeks are still flushed, though, and he looks more ruffled than Johnny’s ever seen him, but Johnny does his best to train his expression back into some semblance of seriousness. “She’s a great lady and all, but just no.”
“I’ll tell her you said so,” Johnny tells him solemnly.

Looch just looks down at him. “Do you just not wanna have sex tonight?”

“Sorry, sorry,” Johnny says. He flops back again on the pillow, and mimes zipping his lips shut, waggling eyebrows suggestively until Looch cracks up.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that,” says Looch. He bends to kiss Johnny, climbing over him and pressing him into the mattress until their dicks grind together and they both moan.

Johnny’s hands are everywhere, never able to get enough of the way Looch’s muscles flex under his skin as he rolls his hips. He feels smothered, contained in a way he never knew he craved, bracketed by knees and forearms, with the air pushed from him in gusts between wet, starving kisses.

His mind doesn’t wander.

He’s here. Now. And Looch’s weight, his presence, is unmistakable for anyone else.

They don’t bother much with prep. Looch gives him a perfunctory couple of fingers to start off with, lubed up and fumbling between them til he finds Johnny’s rim. He just rubs it a little at first, pressing and teasing until Johnny makes a low noise of frustration into his mouth, and then pressing in all the way without preamble.

It’s harsh. A lot, but not enough, even when he works the fingers in deep, giving Johnny’s prostate a little hello stroke.

Slow drag out.

Harsh press in.

Curl. Stroke. Repeat.

Only four or five times, but it’s enough to have Johnny shaking under him, riding back desperately for more, all composure forgotten. He’s sweating already, and panting, and chasing the sloppy kisses Looch keeps leaving with haphazard teeth and tongue.

“Ready?” Looch asks. and Johnny nods.

“Uh huh.”

They’ve tried this a few ways, but what seems to work best for everyone is Johnny’s knees hooked over Looch’s shoulders. It doesn’t make for great kissing during sex, but Johnny’s less concerned with that, in favor of the way Looch can just push in balls-deep on every thrust, and of how the bruises left by Looch’s fingers where they dig into his hips tend to linger for days, even longer than the pleasant, used ache.

Looch is thick, and not terribly long, and it usually takes some work to find Johnny’s prostate with his dick, but Johnny’s into it.

He enjoys just riding out the stretch, the first few minutes of ow, ow, ow jumbled in there along with the oh, hell yes’s and general tumult of sensation and prevailing horniness. The sharp little tugs of discomfort make it that much better when Johnny relaxes enough and Looch finally hits it just right, putting an arch in his spine as his nails find Looch’s wrist and dig in.

“Fuck,” he pants, “fuck, fuck, yes, right there.”
Looch is already pulling back to try it again, and again, a little haphazard, but hitting home more often than not.

“Tell me you’re close,” Looch pants. There’s a bead of sweat on the end of his nose, and his eyes are squeezed shut in concentration. “I’m seriously about to go off, here.”

“Go for it,” Johnny says. Groans. Hand already fumbling southward to work his dick. “Go for it, I’m good.”

Looch grunts a grateful-sounding acknowledgement and jerks his hips, driving in so deep Johnny half believes he could taste it, if not for the stupid condom. He gives a few slow grinds of his hips with forced deliberation, and then he’s fucking into Johnny in a rhythm Johnny tries to match with his hand before it’s over, never long enough, even when he’s pretty sure much more of this would knock him out of playoffs altogether.

Looch says, “Shit,” and pulls out to flop, still panting, on the bed next to Johnny. Partially on top of Johnny. Sweaty and heavy and comfortable, with a calloused hand wrapping over Johnny’s knuckles and guiding the movement until Johnny groans and stiffens and comes all over both of them.

“Gross,” says Looch, face half-buried in Johnny’s pillow.

Johnny laughs. “Stop bitching, then, and get a towel.”

Looch mimics him soundlessly, and reaches over the side of the bed, locating Johnny’s shirt and dropping it unceremoniously on his face.

“Thanks, bud.”

“Any time.”

Johnny wipes off as Looch disposes of the condom. Somewhere in the jumble of discarded clothes on the floor, a phone vibrates.

“I think that’s me,” Looch says, bending to dig through the assortment. He’s still in the now rumpled button-down, and Johnny’s pretty sure there’s a nice smear of lube down the back of the left sleeve.

“Yep. Dave says a few of the guys are over at Khu’s, they got some movies and want me to come hang out.” He frowns, starting to type out a response. “Sorry, I’ll tell them no. Hang on.”

“You should go,” Johnny says, surprising himself. Looch looks up, but Johnny just nods, waving a hand at the phone. “Go, dude, it’s cool. I don’t mind, and I could just crash, anyway.”

He firmly ignores the part of himself that had been hoping, deep down, that maybe Looch would’ve wanted to sleep over. Share the bed. Carry this thing that pathetic little half a step further. By the look on Looch’s face, it’s possible Johnny’s not the only one who’s thought about it.

But he rallies, straightens, finishes his text and tugs on his pants with the easy grin back in place.

“So long as you’re sure, dude. Bergy might be there, I could ask if they’re cool with you coming?”

“No,” Johnny says firmly. And seriously, no way. “Thanks man, but I’m really, honestly tired as fuck. I’ll see you soon?”

They don’t usually do a lot of kissing after hooking up, but Looch lingers a moment at the door, once Krejci’s texted that they’re outside waiting. He smiles, and Johnny smiles back, laughing a little bashfully at he doesn’t know what.

“Sir,” says Looch, putting on a drawl and tipping an imaginary cowboy hat. “It’s been a pleasure.”

“Right back at you,” Johnny says, leering. “Sir.”

Looch laughs, hesitating half a beat before ducking down and planting a kiss on Johnny’s mouth. And then he’s gone, out the door and down the steps to the idling car, before Johnny can gather the presence of mind to slap his ass on the way out.
May: Geno

Geno spends a full five minutes staring at his reflection in the visor mirror, messing with his hair, and the buttons on his shirt, and checking for imaginary spinach between his teeth. When he finally flips it back up, Patrice is watching him from the open doorway, warm light spilling from the house onto the front steps and casting long shadows into the yard.

“Hey,” he says, grinning, and Geno smiles back even while his heart is threatening to crawl up into his throat.

“Hi.”

Patrice looks fine. He looks like Patrice, so he looks better than fine. Geno just looks at him for a moment, basking in at least this small weight off his mind.

“...What?” Patrice says. He’s still smiling but looking a little nervous now, glancing down at himself. “What, is there something on my shirt?”

“No, no,” Geno shakes his head, leaning in and kissing Patrice’s cheek, mindful of the open door and cooking sounds emanating down the hall from the kitchen. Patrice reaches down and twines their fingers. “I just...Expecting you to look worse.”

Patrice actually laughs out loud. “What? Why? It’s just a couple fractured ribs, G. Not like, some kind of mortal wound or something. Jeez.” He leans up on tiptoe and catches Geno’s mouth in a quick kiss before Geno can duck away.

“You not see when you fell,” Geno says, keeping his voice low. “Looked...bad. I not know what to think. Just see your face, you look scared, so I get scared, too.”

“Oh.” Patrice’s face does something weird, and then he’s kissing Geno again. There’s nothing quick about this, though. The way he crowds into Geno’s space and brackets his face between his palms, stroking thumbs down the curve of his jawline until Geno relaxes a little and kisses back. When they finally break apart Patrice’s cheeks are flushed dark in the yellow porch light. “You can still touch me, you know,” he says, teasing edge back in the quirk of his lips. “You’re not gonna break me. Just be careful with my left side.”


“Oh,” Patrice says again. “Oh. Don’t worry, they’re totally ignoring us right now.” He rolls his eyes. “Seriously, you have nothing to worry about. I’m the one they’re going to embarrass on purpose.”

“So they. They think--” Geno gesticulates vaguely between them, trying to figure out what he’s trying to ask. “This is okay? You with me?”

Patrice snorts. “Are you kidding? After the hospital? They already think you’re great. You don’t have to be nervous, c’mom.”

He tugs Geno’s hand until Geno follows him, trying to breathe, to think, to not completely freeze up when Patrice’s dad looks up at him over the salad he’s putting together, and smiles.

“Patrice’s English student,” Patrice’s dad says. “We meet again.”

“Dad,” Patrice grumbles, but Mr. Bergeron ignores him.
“Gerard,” he says, holding his hand out to shake, which Geno does, suddenly paralyzingly aware of how he’s bigger than this guy; how much space he’s taking up in the bright, tidy kitchen.

“Geno,” Geno says, after an awkwardly long pause during which Patrice is exactly no help, collecting a handful of carrot slices off the cutting board and crunching them loudly.

“I remember,” Mr. Bergeron -- Gerard -- says, clearly amused. His eyes do the same crinkly thing at the edges that Patrice’s do; something in Geno’s chest eases. “But now we’re officially introduced. Would you like something to drink? Patrice, show him what we have.”

Patrice throws the last carrot bits into his mouth before his dad shoos him away from the counter and grabs a couple of glasses from the cupboard behind himself.

“Just water,” Geno says quickly, before Patrice can start rattling off the contents of the fridge. “Water fine.”

“Sure, sure,” Patrice says, filling a glass from the sink and handing it to Geno before pouring himself something from a jug. “We’ve got lemonade and milk and cranberry juice and stuff, if you want something different later.”

Geno takes a few perfunctory gulps, mostly just glad for something to do with his hands.

Before he can get too comfortable, though, Patrice’s mom appears, coming down the stairs.

“Geno,” she says, beaming, and Geno has to hastily fumble his water glass to hold out a hand for her to shake. “I’m so glad you made it. I’m Sylvie, I don’t think we’ve ever been formally introduced.” She casts an exaggerated look of disapproval over at her son, who becomes instantly fascinated with his juice.

Geno says, “Thank you for inviting me,” and tries not to fidget under the slightly amused look she gives him.

“It seemed about time,” she says simply, with a soft little smile. Across the kitchen, Patrice chokes into his glass.

“Oh,” says Gerard, glancing up at him over the tomato he’s slicing. “Were you two trying to be subtle?”

“Oh my god,” Patrice says, going pink to the tips of his ears. He starts rummaging loudly through a drawer, pulling out handfuls of utensils. “We’re going to go set the table.” He widens his eyes significantly at Geno, who smiles nervously at Sylvie and follows him gratefully back down the hall to the dining room. “Sorry,” Patrice says, once they’re out of earshot. “They’re just...like that.”

“Seem nice?” Geno tries, taking the silverware Patrice hands him and starting to lay out the place settings. Finally something he knows how to do backwards and forwards.

“Oh yeah,” Patrice shrugs, waving a fork distractedly. “They’re fine. They’re just getting back at me for not telling them about you. Guillaume started bringing girlfriends around for dinner starting back in like, his freshman year, so I think they’re just glad I finally got around to it.”

“And they really don’t care,” Geno says, picking his words carefully, “that I am not...girlfriend?”

“Oh, please,” Patrice snorts, straightening a knife and standing back to admire their work. “They’re just glad I’m taking the time to socialize.” He raises his voice an octave, mimicking his mother. Geno laughs.
“Perfect Prince Patrice,” he coos, and Patrice punches him in the arm. “Should definitely be more social.”

Patrice grins at him, a little shyly, and Geno grins back.

As if on cue, Mr. Bergeron’s voice cuts in from the kitchen. “We’re eating in five minutes,” he calls, and Patrice visibly shakes himself back to attention.

“Okay,” he yells back, and then pecks Geno on the cheek before taking his hand and tugging him back in the direction of the kitchen. “Hey,” he says, “relax. You’re doing good.”

Geno relaxes. At least, he relaxes enough to eat, between answering the routine questions about school and working for his mom at the restaurant and hockey. Hockey, at least, is something he has the vocabulary for.

Patrice’s foot nudging his under the table helps, too.

“Another captain,” Sylvie says, raising her eyebrows significantly over at Patrice, who just looks smug.

“You know,” Gerard cuts in, gesturing toward Patrice with his spoon, “we never pegged Patrice for a forward when he was little.”

Patrice glares at him. “Dad, Geno doesn’t want to hear this story.”

“Is that true?” Patrice’s dad asks, smiling in affected politeness over at Geno, who catches Patrice’s eye and smirks.

“No, no,” he says. “I like hearing. Please tell.”

Under the table Patrice aims a kick at his ankle. Gerard beams at him. “Well, we started taking him to the rink when he was about five, paid for skating lessons and everything, but for the first couple months he just sat in the net. All the other little kids would wobble around on the ice, falling down and hanging on to the instructors, but Patrice just sat there. For months.”

“It wasn’t that long,” Patrice mutters mutinously into his soup, but his parents ignore him.

“You can imagine our surprise when it turned out he couldn’t save a thing,” his mother says, reaching over to pat his arm.

“You’re not funny,” Patrice tells her, and Geno takes a hasty sip of water to cover his giggling.

As soon as he collects himself, he says, “Patrice very good player. Very challenging on ice. Even beat Consol once this season, I think.” He smiles winningly over at Patrice, whose lips twitch, heavily detracting from the huffy scowl he’s trying to maintain.

“Yeah, well, it’s the playoffs that matter now, huh?” Patrice shoots back, primly.

Geno carries the dishes into the kitchen when they’re finished eating, helping load the dishwasher before Patrice walks him out.

“You have to take off right away?” Patrice asks, shutting the door and surrounding them with warm spring breeze and the sound of night insects.

Geno shakes his head. “Tell Mama I help balance books, but not need to rush.”
Patrice says, “Good.” He smiles and leans up, and the last thing Geno notices before they kiss is the way the distant sodium glow of the streetlight reflects in his eyes before he shuts them.

The curtains of the den window facing onto the porch are open and they’re in full view of the whole street, not that anybody seems to be hanging around outside to notice. Geno knows -- he knows -- that there’s no danger in this, there’s no threat, but this does nothing to quell the hot little rebellious flare that curls through him, the excited sparks that fly up in the wake of Patrice backing him against the wall beside the front door.

A litany of *We can do this now, we can do this* keeps thrumming through his head amid a clamor of nerves, some wary, some excited.

He pulls back and breathes. He looks down at Patrice, at the way his hands stand out pale as ghosts where they’re curled in the dark fabric of Geno’s shirt.

Geno says, “I love you.”

Patrice smiles.

“Yeah,” he says, “I love you, too.”

Geno can feel his fingers tighten their hold as he leans back in, catching Geno’s mouth again.

This time, Geno is aware of nothing but the warmth of him, how Patrice seems to radiate heat through the both of them. It seeps into his flesh, straight down to the bone until there’s nothing else but the swelling thrill of hearing those words out loud.
“How your ribs feeling?” Geno asks, as Patrice eases his way gingerly into the passenger seat.

Patrice makes a face. “They’re fine, same as when you texted me this morning. How was work?”

“Eh,” says Geno, shrugging as he pulls on his seatbelt. “Was work. I probably smelling like dill until graduate, but finish catering order before leave so no worrying for Denis.”

“You’re a good brother,” Patrice tells him. Geno makes a face but twines their fingers together over the shifter. “I hope it’s okay, I told Segs and Marchy and Davy they could ride with us? They’re at Marchy’s, so it’ll be easy to just swing by and grab them on the way to the party.”

“Is no problem,” says Geno. To his credit, he only sounds a little stiff about it.

Patrice gives his fingers a little squeeze. “You really sure you’re cool with this? Going to a party right after getting bumped out of the playoffs, I’d totally get it if you wanted to just ditch and go hang out or something.”

“You want to go, though,” Geno says. Patrice glances away, shrugging.

“I guess.”

“Then we go,” Geno says, decisively. “I be fine.”

He runs his thumb reassuringly over Patrice’s knuckles, and when Patrice finally looks up, he smiles.

Patrice says, “Okay, but if Segs starts mouthing off, we’ll just make him walk.”

Geno snickers, and Patrice grins over at him, catching flashes of his smirking face with each passing set of headlights.

Patrice thinks, mine.

He says, “My parents have been super gross about you all week, dude. Dad keeps saying you need to come over again and teach him how to cook Russian stuff, but I think they just want to interrogate you some more.”

“Ah,” Geno says wisely. “Probably just want tell me more stories about small Patrice. Soon I learn all secrets.”

“Please,” Patrice huffs. “That’s only fun if I get to hear your embarrassing stories.”

Geno’s smile falters. “Yeah, I know. Sorry.”

“Dude.” Patrice thuds his head against the headrest of his seat, sighing. “Don’t be sorry. I didn’t
mean-- Look, I know the situation with your parents, okay? I’ll just have to badger your friends for embarrassing stories about you.”

He smiles hopefully over at Geno, who rolls his eyes, but smiles back.

“Swearing them all to secrecy, first chance I get,” he says, but there’s still something shuttered behind his expression.

Patrice nudges him, eyes returning to the road. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” says Geno, but Patrice shoots a glare at him. “Just, not fun hiding from my family. Usually we all good at talking.”

“Yeah, but usually they wouldn’t deport you for being honest,” Patrice mutters.

Geno shrugs. “It is what it is.”

“What it is blows,” says Patrice. Geno squeezes his hand.

They round a bend and Marchy’s house comes into sight, the guys all grouped together on the front steps. Davy sees them first, waving an arm and getting up. Segs is the last to stand, looking sullen as he trails after the others, pushing and shoving over who has to sit in the middle.

Marchy jumps up off the porch step waving like a dumbass. Davy slides off the railing and drops into the grass, slipping what looks like a flask into his pocket. Segs stays where he is, ass rooted to the cement stair and looking sullen. Only when Marchy leans down and says something to him that Patrice can’t hear from the car does Segs get up and follow them both over. Patrice suddenly feels like he’s got a farm of eels writhing around in his stomach.

“What’s up, kids?” says Marchy, leaning forward to mess up Patrice’s hair and leering at him in the rearview mirror.

Patrice swats him away. “Not much. How’re you?”

“I’d be better if Davy would stop fucking poking me. OW, motherfucker!” He elbows Davy back, hard. “You snooze, you lose. Sit your happy ass in the middle, and like it.”

“I shouldn’t have to, since you’re the smallest,” Davy snipes back, as Segs guffaws loudly at Marchy’s indignant expression.

“Will you guys just sit down?” Patrice says. “We’re already running late.”

“And whose fault is that?” Marchy asks. “It’s not our fault you guys were too busy canoodling—”

“Shut up,” says Patrice. Stopped at a light, he catches the sour look on Segs’ face in the mirror. “Geno was finishing up at work.”

“Hi,” says Geno, gamely. He leans around in his seat, and Marchy offers a fistbump. “Thanks for inviting me.”

Davy holds out a flask. “Pregame?”

“No thanks,” Geno says, but he looks delighted enough at the offer that Patrice holds off yelling at anyone about open liquor containers in a car full of teenagers.

Segs says, “I’ll take it!” and just like that, the effect is ruined.
“Nobody is drinking in this fucking car,” Patrice snaps, and in the rearview mirror he sees Davy scrunch down in his seat, stuffing the flask out of view. Segs meets his eyes and glowers, and Patrice just stares levelly back.

Things are quiet for a few minutes. Patrice finds his ramp and gets onto the highway.

“So, uh,” Davy says finally. “Geno. From Consol.”

Geno says, “Geno from Consol, yes.”

“You weren’t by any chance at a party in your guys’ dorms, awhile back? That we, um. Attended. And Bergy disappeared for a couple hours and when he came back he had a big hick—”

“Ooookay,” Patrice says loudly. “Marchy, it’s this exit, right?”

“Yep,” Marchy says. “Wait, I remember that party! The one where we snuck in and Bergy totally disappeared as soon as we got there.”

“Was at party, yes,” Geno says. “But not ever see Patrice. Have no idea where he might get hickey. Maybe he not tell me whole truth.” He gives Patrice a mock-glare before beaming at Davy, who grins back.

Patrice glares intently at the road ahead. “You’re all terrible people,” he says.

Marchy ruffles his hair.

When they get there, the party is already in full swing, spilling out into the yard from what looks like a smaller ranch-style. A couple guys sitting out on the low stone wall hemming it in from the sidewalk wave when they catch sight of Geno through the window, and he waves back.

“Glasser and Sid,” Geno says, sounding surprised. “Didn’t think they’d actually come.”

“Maybe they got tired of sulking after that loss,” says Segs. “Ow, stop friggen’ elbowing me, Krejci. I’m just saying.”

“Keep saying, and you can walk the hell home,” says Patrice, loudly. “And don’t start shit here. This is a Madison house and if we see them in the final—”

“Keep it on the ice, blah blah blah,” says Segs, waving him off and getting out of the car. “Yeah, I got you.”

“What the fuck,” mutters Davy, as Segs takes off up the front walk. “Berg, if you want us to talk to him—”

“No,” Patrice says, firmly. “Thanks, but that’ll probably just make it worse. You know how he is, he’ll get his head out of his ass eventually.”

He starts toward the house, but Geno holds him back, wearing a worried frown.

“Should I have come?”

“What do you mean?” Patrice asks, waving Davy and Marchy on ahead of them. “Of course you should’ve come.”

“But your friend still upset,” Geno persists. “I don’t want to come between, or make worse.”
Patrice snorts. “Please. Ty’s being dramatic. Any chance for him to be the center of attention.”

“He doesn’t like…” Geno gestures between the two of them. “He think it’s wrong?”

“I don’t know what he thinks,” Patrice says, honestly. “I don’t think he knows, either. I think he’s just jealous or something.” Geno’s eyebrows hike up significantly. “Not like that. Like, how we’ve been best friends since practically forever, and all of a sudden our lives don’t revolve around each other anymore. He’ll adjust.”

“Okay,” Geno says, slowly, but he still looks dubious.

“It’ll be fine, I swear,” Patrice says, hoping he’s right. “C’mon, let’s go in.”

Geno takes his hand and they make their way up the front walk. It’s only then that Patrice realizes, with a shock like icewater, that this is the first party they’re going to together. Not secretly, not sneaking around or accidentally bumping into each other, or hiding away in laundry rooms. He falters a step.

“Are you sure you’re okay with being here?” he asks.

Geno turns to look at him. “Are you?”

Patrice nods silently, and Geno gives his hand a gentle tug. “We be fine,” he says. “Madison guys okay. Your guys okay. And my guys very okay.”

He grins, waving at Glass and Crosby as they slide off the wall to meet them.

Patrice tries to focus on Geno’s hand in his. Tries to focus on the way his fingers squeeze reassuringly, the way he smiles shyly introducing Patrice Bergeron, Causeway captain, his boyfriend, to his friends.

He tries not to think about the ugly look on Segs’ face as he’d gotten out of the car, or the house full of people who get to share in this private, safe little corner of his life. He kind of misses that laundry room.

Glass grins and says, “Hey!” He catches Patrice’s outstretched hand and pulls him into a hug. Over his shoulder, Crosby looks suddenly nervous, like he’s concerned this might be an expectation. “Geno’s told me-- uh. I mean. It’s nice to finally meet you. Off ice.”


“What’s up?” Geno asks. “Not expecting to see you here.”

“Flower dragged us,” Crosby says. He looks long-suffering, and plunks back down on the wall. “We left him and Nealer inside doing keg-stands a little while ago. They’re probably both unconscious by now.” He sounds a little hopeful.

“Oh hey, that reminds me,” says Glass. “Bergeron, dude, how’s your ribs? That was a gnarly hit Letang gave you.”

“Eh,” Patrice says, but his hand goes reflexively to his left side, still tender under the layers of winter clothing. “It was just a rib fracture, nothing too bad.”

Geno snorts. “You out of game for a month,” he says indignantly.

“Or sooner,” Patrice shoots back. “I have to monitor my breathing and, like, how well I can move
my upper body and stuff, and Coach said if the doc signs off, I could be back for final round, if we make it there.” He flinches reflexively, avoiding the looks on the Consol guys’ faces. “Sorry.”

“Dude, it’s fine,” says Glass, while Crosby studies his feet.

“Still need to be careful,” Geno insists. He ignores Patrice’s eye-rolls and protests, taking up a post at his left side like a bouncer and shunting people aside as they enter the house. In his chest, Patrice’s heart does something stupid and swoopy.

Glass calls, “Shots!” and produces four little glasses of something pinkish, passing them around. Patrice sniffs his. It smells like a Jolly Rancher. He knocks it back and it burns all the way down, not altogether unpleasantly.

“Za vas!” Geno says, and follows suit.

“Any more where this came from?” Patrice asks, raising his voice to be heard over the clamor of voices and Jay Z currently combining to make the windows rattle.

“Oh buddy,” Glass grins, clapping him on the arm. “We’re gonna get along great.”

Crosby says, “Here, take mine,” holding it out for Patrice. “Hey G, do you remember who’s riding with who to the award dinner next week? Flower said his mom can’t pick him up like he thought, and he needs to carpool.”

Geno glances at Patrice, who just shrugs and salutes with Crosby’s glass, waving them off to confer between themselves.

The second shot burns less going down, and by the fifth, all he can taste is the cloying sweet aftertaste.

“It’s cotton candy flavored,” Glass laughs, catching sight of Patrice’s face after number six. “Flower showed me how to make them. He thinks he’s hilarious.”

“Flower knows he’s hilarious,” says Fleury’s voice right behind Patrice, making him jump and turn around. Only, in what feels like slow motion, which, wow. Maybe he should slow down.

Fleury leers down at him.

“Hi,” says Patrice.

“Hi,” Flower replies. Lowering his voice, he says, “Geno’s secret boyfriend. We meet at last.”

“Secret?” Patrice snorts. “Didn’t you tell the whole team?”

Beside him, Glass snorts into his drink.

“He wouldn’t have told me if he didn’t want the guys to know,” Fleury says easily, taking a swig from the bottle of Corona he’s holding. “Besides, I didn’t say anything about you. I just knew there was a guy. What’s the big deal?”

“There’s no big deal,” Patrice says.

“Yo,” says Glass. “You guys play nice, I’m gonna go try and find Neal, and make sure he’s not dead yet.”
He disappears into the crowd, leaving Patrice drunk in an unfamiliar house, alone in the company of Marc-Andre Fleury. Fleury smiles wolfishly at him.

“I should sit down,” says Patrice. And just like that he’s sitting on the floor, legs folded haphazardly beneath him and with a distant throbbing around his cracked rib.

Fleury sinks down next to him, taking another swig of his beer.

“Man, are you alright?” he asks dubiously, peering over at Patrice and frowning. The leer is gone, replaced by a look of genuine concern. “Should you even be drinking? Geno said you were in the hospital--”

“Oh my god can everyone stop bringing that up?” Patrice snaps, and then immediately feels like a giant douchebag. “I’m-- it’s fine, okay. I’m not on medication anymore, or anything, it’s not a big deal. I swear this is all anyone’s ever gonna ask me about til I graduate.” He huffs, stealing Fleury’s beer and taking a gulp.

“Sorry I said anything,” says Fleury, but he doesn’t actually sound annoyed. “Is that why Geno’s off with Sid and you’re sitting here on the floor with me? I know he can be overprotective and shit, you should see him with the freshmen.”

Patrice follows Fleury’s gaze, over to where Geno is leaned back into a corner talking to Crosby. He looks happy, relaxed, gesticulating wildly with a beer in his hand as Crosby laughs.

Patrice sighs.

He says, “No, that’s not it,” worrying at a wayward thread from his hoodie. He picks at it. The air around him feels like squishy padding. “It’s just...This is so much, you know? Like, one day we’re just us, and everything is cool, and the next it’s like, everybody suddenly has to know our business. It has to be some big deal, and I’m-- I’m afraid it’s gonna fuck us up,” he finishes, lamely.

When he glances over, Fleury’s eyes are almost perfectly round, and he says, “Ah.”

Patrice shrugs, and silently vows never to drink again.

“Um,” says Geno’s voice, and hey, Patrice recognizes those shoes standing on the carpet in front of him. He follows their corresponding jeans upward, and there’s Geno, looming over him and looking really, really tall.

“There’s Ge-- There you are,” Patrice tells them all.

“Hey, so uh, I’m gonna go grab another beer,” Fleury says quickly, getting to his feet and gesturing needlessly toward the kitchen. “You guys have...fun.” He’s gone before Patrice can blink.

Geno reaches down and helps Patrice carefully to his feet. “Hear my name,” he says. “You sounding upset. I worrying when you sound so sad talking about me.”

“What if this fucks us up?” Patrice blurts, feeling his cheeks go even hotter under the blush of alcohol. He gestures vaguely around at the party. “Everybody knowing our business and stuff.”

Drunk as he is, Patrice is still aware of how lame those words sound out loud. He winces.

Geno gives him a long, searching look. Finally, he says, “You come, we go quieter place.”

He leads them both down a dimly lit hall, ushering Patrice through a door into what turns out to be a
cramped guest bathroom, which is great, because Patrice is so grossed out with himself he thinks he might puke.

Geno presses the lock down behind them. “Okay,” he says, gently. “Now explain why you freaking out.”

Patrice shrugs.

“You worried what people say?”

Patrice shrugs again.

Geno sighs. He leans down and kisses Patrice. He says, “I love you.”

“I love you, too,” Patrice says, quietly. “I just kinda miss when it was only you and me.”

Geno glances around. “You see anyone else here?”

“You know what I mean,” Patrice grumbles. “People talk, and gossip and whatever, and it’s none of their business. What if-- What if we break up or something?”

“You want to break up?”

“No!” Patrice’s fingers curl in the fabric of Geno’s jacket, and he hangs on, holding Geno’s eyes and silently willing him to just get it. “I just mean, like, you saw what happened with Kane and Toews. Everyone talked about it, there were all kinds of rumors. It was gross. Even when they were together, people talked, and-- and what if your parents find out? They come to games, what if--”

“Then they find out,” Geno says, quietly. He reaches up, smoothing Patrice’s hair back off of his forehead where it’s sticky with sweat. “It happen when it happen, and then we deal with it.”

“How can you be so calm about that?” Patrice demands, giving Geno’s arm a little shake where he’s still clinging to it. “You’re the one who told me they’d lose their fucking minds! What if your dad tries to kick you out? What if he puts you on a plane before we can even say goodbye?”

He sounds nuts. He feels nuts, clinging to Geno in this tiny, bright space, working himself up until he feels suffocated. He gulps air, cradling his ribs as the sharp breaths cut painfully through his hazy buzz.

Geno keeps stroking his hair. Finally, when Patrice’s breath has slowed, he says, “I promise, won’t let that happen.”

Patrice starts, “Yeah, but you can’t control--” but Geno cuts him off.

“I’m almost eighteen. My dad can’t make me get on plane, can’t make me leave without saying goodbye.” He leans down again, and this time the kiss is slow and deliberate. “I’m here,” he says, when they finally pull apart for breath. “I’m yours.”

Patrice hangs on and lets Geno’s arms fold around him, ignoring the pain in his side as he presses in as tight as he can go. He says, “Yeah, okay,” with his face buried in Geno’s shoulder, as Geno’s hand rubs soothingly over his back.

“You gonna be alright?” Geno asks, and Patrice nods.

“I think so. Sorry.”
“Is fine,” Geno says, reassuringly. He drops a kiss on Patrice’s temple. “You really so worried people saying mean things about us?”

Patrice shakes his head. “No. I don’t know. I guess not. I guess it was just kinda nice when it was our secret, you know?”

Geno grins. It’s an easy thing for Patrice to lean up and kiss him again, so he does. Geno kisses back. He says, “I love you,” against Patrice’s temple, behind his ear, against his neck, until Patrice thinks he might overflow with it. The brimming relief and satisfaction in his chest making his head feel lighter than the waning effects of the shots.
MTL folds in the second game, and Johnny watches Price break his stick on the way off the ice from where he’s being bear-hugged by his whole team at once.

“Finals!” Bicks is shouting, from somewhere in the tangle. “We’re going to the fucking final, baby!”

Pat bounds up to him as they all begin to break apart, beaming under his layer of sweat, hair plastered to his forehead where he’s let it grow out again. He stops just short, looking almost shy, but his face lights up again when Johnny bumps his fist.

“That was a sweet fucking pass,” he says, and Johnny shrugs, grinning. “You were in the right place at the right time.”

Pat laughs, loud and buoyant, and cuffs Johnny on the shoulder before surging forward and hugging him tight. “Fuck off with that modest act, asshole. We just fucking won!”

He gives Johnny another squeeze, and moves off back through the thinning crowd, as guys begin making their way toward the dressing rooms.

Johnny hears Krugs calling something about his parents wanting to take any guys who want to go out for ice cream, and Shaw’s answering shout about having a real party as he follows Bollig and Carbomb down the dim corridor. He doesn’t want to go out, not really. He feels as though he’s poised at the edge of a cliff, although not altogether uncomfortably; like he’s just waiting for the next gust of wind to sweep him up. Like he can do anything. Like they can do anything. And he wants to hang onto this, not drink it away, or drown it in rowdy teammates and excited chirps and plans and anything that might tie him back down to reality.

The reality of a series with Causeway, who are looking all the more formidable for having rallied at the last second to come back and beat out Capital. They’re ragged and angry and have their backs to a wall in a way that makes them hungrier than Johnny’s guys, who are all full of expectation and bravado after a league-leading regular season.

Madison has speed, and entitlement. They expect to win. They’ve learned to assume, and it’s been working for them. Well, that, and a pretty great penalty kill. Causeway has hunger on their side, and rage, and size.

Johnny feels it in his bones as he falls asleep that night, and in the morning, when he wakes up early to catch open ice stick-and-puck at the rink near his house. He sees it in his team in the halls and during practices throughout the week, sobered and resolute after their last win.

He sees it on Looch’s face as both teams take to the ice for warmups the following Friday.

“See you on the other side, eh?” he says, and Johnny nods.

“See you out there.”

He looks up and catches Patrice in the stands, watching. Malkin is next to him, and Patrice’s parents, and Johnny salutes him before scanning the assembled crowd for his own mom and dad. They’re sitting with the rest of the Madison parents, David hunkered next to their dad, focused on his phone.

High in the stands, Johnny knows, is a section reserved for college scouts. He forces himself not to look, instead taking a few practice shots out on Crow, and skating back to stretch against the boards.
Johnny can’t remember the last time he felt really, truly nervous before a game, but it takes a force of will to keep his face impassive as he takes his position for the opening faceoff. Across the dot, Krejci is scowling through his cage, and Johnny gives him a little nod that he doesn’t return.

The great thing about hockey is, no matter how anxious Johnny feels, or whatever else is on his mind, it all disappears the second the puck drops.

He wins the faceoff, Krejci lunging a second too late as Johnny throws the puck back to Hjammer before streaking for Causeway’s zone. There’s no time to think, no time to worry about anything except the game, and as games go, this one is brutal. Johnny had been right in thinking that Causeway would be hungry for it after narrowly missing elimination.

Looch flattens Shaw against the boards, creating a scoring chance for Krejci that Crow barely catches in time, skidding sideways and throwing his blocker wide.

They trade chances back and forth until the end of the second when, by a stroke of pure luck, Causeway gets stuck in the middle of a bad change. Johnny is screaming himself hoarse from the bench, banging his stick on the boards with Carbomb and Pat next to him as Krugs, Fro, and Shaw take the odd-man rush, Krugs in the lead.

He drops to Fro, weaving in behind him just wide of Causeway’s stranded defenseman’s stick, and Fro takes the shot. It’s in an out of Rask’s glove faster than thinking, Rask fumbling desperately to cover, but Shaw ploughs right into the crease and slams the loose puck in under his pad.

The whistle blows, and the refs converge at Causeway’s net. Shaw had taken a nosedive past the post, and he’s still picking himself up with Frolik’s assistance, but Tuukks is already on his feet, fuming. He’s shouting something Johnny can’t hear over the ringing in his ears, and the chatter and scuffle on the bench around him. He waves his gloved hand, gesturing behind him into the net, but one of the refs just shakes his head and raises his arms to the crowd.

*Good goal.*

Johnny’s team roars, leaping to their feet and resuming the banging of sticks with renewed ferocity. Pat is clinging to Johnny, dancing up and down in his skates and screaming wordlessly in Johnny’s ear.

Shaw skates over, followed by Krugs and Fro, looking only a little dazed as he accepts fist-bumps and jostling down the bench. Across the ice, Johnny watches Rask still fuming, swinging his stick furiously against the goal post as the refs resume their posts and the next shifts spill over the boards and onto the ice.

“We got this,” Pat is shouting, still hanging tight to Johnny’s arm as he reaches over to punch Bicks in the side. “This is it, we fucking *got* this!”

Johnny tugs his arm free, and straightens his jersey. “That was the first goal, and this is the first game,” Johnny reminds him, quietly. “We need to stay focused.”

Pat snorts. “Cheer up, Captain Killjoy. We haven’t lost a game yet this season where we scored first. This shit is ours, motherfucker. You fucking watch.”

“You fucking watch,” Johnny retorts. “Pay attention. Causeway is pissed now, we need to keep our heads up and—”

“Stay focused,” Pat finishes, rolling his eyes. “Yes. We’ve heard.”
They manage to hold the lead through the rest of the second, but three minutes into the third, Looch rifles a snapshot over Crow’s left pad that knocks his water bottle off the top of the net. Johnny feels it like a punch to the gut.

“Defense!” Coach Mayers shouts, storming back and forth behind the bench. “Did you guys see that? Crawford was wide open while your teammates were dickling around behind the net. Centers, you too! I want to see you down low, clearing the puck up and out. Ice it if you have to, but if I see one more of you idiots caught following the puck like that and ignoring your man, I’m stapling your sweaters to this bench until graduation.”

There’s a scattered muttering of, “Yes, Coach,” and Johnny shoots Pat an I told you so glare. Pat looks very busy inspecting his stick.

The game becomes a grind. They still trade a few chances back and forth, but true to Coach’s request, the defense has buckled down, and everything narrows down to a cold war of takeaways, hard checks, and skirmishes along the boards. Bicks and Thornton get five each for fighting, Bicks taking the extra two for instigation.

Krugs and Fro take point on the penalty kill, seemingly reading each other’s minds as they run circles around Lucic, Krejcí, and Seguin. Even so, Johnny can’t sit still until it’s over. He leans over the boards, alternating between watching the play and the clock, counting down the seconds until they’re back at full strength.

Time trickles down in a series of increasingly exhausting, frustrating shifts. Johnny couldn’t buy a goal if he tried, missing his third scoring chance on a practically open net, and returning fuming to the bench. He slams his stick against the boards and it breaks, blade end skittering across the ice as the ref’s whistle sounds.

“What the fuck?” he shouts, as the ref signals him to the box. “I didn’t fucking do anything illegal! I didn’t throw--”

“Two minutes,” the ref says sternly, pointing to the penalty boxes.

“What the fuck?” Johnny shouts again, and again, the ref blows his whistle.

“Four minutes,” he snaps. “You can get your ass to the box, or I can give you a misconduct and you can spend the rest of this game in the dressing room.”

Johnny forces his mouth shut over more protests. He takes the replacement stick Duncs passes him and skates grudgingly over to the box. The timekeeper holds the door open for him.

“Don’t see a lot of you in here,” she says, and he glares at her, stalking over to the bench and collapsing with a grunt.

Play resumes, Krugs and Fro heading back out on the penalty kill. The penalty kill which is Johnny’s fault, and also the last thing his team needs. They’ve got under six minutes of play left in the third, and if Causeway scores now...He can’t even think about it.

He glowers at the wall of plexi in front of him, not really focusing on anything happening outside. He can’t watch. He can’t even think about it. If he hears the goal horn--

“Yo.” Johnny turns so fast he nearly drops his stick. Seabs is leaning into the box from the back entrance behind him. “Can I come in, or are you going to bludgeon me to death if I get too close?”

Johnny grunts again, and resumes staring straight ahead.
Seabs settles on the bench next to him, shifting in the tight space to get comfortable. “So, what the fuck is up with you?”

“I’m playing like shit,” Johnny says, without looking at him. “And I just got the stupidest four-minute penalty ever. I’m sorry, am I not happy enough about that for you?”

Seabs bumps their shoulders together. “Dude,” he says, quellingly. “Hey, I’m not here to give you a lecture. I’m just...worried.”

Johnny glances sidelong at him. “I’m fine.”

“Yeah,” says Seabs. “Getting that.”

“God, shut up,” Johnny says, and Seabs jostles him again, harder this time.

“Look,” he says. “We have under three minutes now for me to talk you out of your own head, so this is happening. Look out there at your team, what do you see?”

“A bunch of really tired guys who didn’t need to kill another--”

“No, I mean actually look.”

Johnny does. They’re nearly halfway through his four minutes, and he looks up just in time to see Shaw bat the puck out from under Marchand’s nose, all the way down for Rask to play.

“Do your teammates look like they’re falling apart out there?” Seabs asks.

Johnny hesitates, and shakes his head.

“No, they don’t,” Seabs agrees. “You guys are hot shit. You’ve all been hot shit all season. And sure, part of that is from you, being a good captain, but a lot of it is also them being a really good team. Right?”

“Right,” Johnny mutters.

“Right,” Seabs echoes, rolling his eyes. “Sure, whatever. I’ll take it. You just get back out there and be better, not to decompensate until you’re too busy blaming yourself for every little thing to actually turn it around.”

Madison’s penalty kill cycles seamlessly, sending the puck down ice again as the penalty clock ticks down with thirty seconds left. Johnny grips his stick harder.

“Yeah,” he says, at last.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” Johnny repeats. “You’re probably right.”

“Probably,” Seabs echoes, rolling his eyes. “Sure, whatever. I’ll take it. You just get back out there and make me proud. You wanna redeem yourself? Save us all from overtime.”

Johnny bursts back onto the ice as the timekeeper opens the door for him. He feels...not better, necessarily, but like his vision has cleared. Like his brain and his body are actually working together, finally, and not at odds with each other.
He doesn’t score before the buzzer ending period three, but the boiling hot frustration simmering under his skin is starting to feel more like cold resolve with every moment he spends out on the ice.

Nobody complains about overtime, even though Johnny assumes everyone else on his team has got to be as exhausted as he is. More, probably, since they didn’t just spend four minutes sitting on their asses. Regardless, no one says a word as they all take their places, Coach blazing back and forth behind the bench again, shouting about short shifts and careful changes.

It’s starting to feel like they’ve forgotten about scoring, in favor of just wearing each other down to attrition. Overtime drags on. Hjammer takes a puck to the side, in the narrow gap between his protective gear, and goes down on all fours, winded.

The ref’s whistle blows, but Hjammer is already staggering back to his feet, helped by Oduya, and waving the ref off.

“Fine,” Johnny hears, above the hubbub. “I’m fine. Resume play.”

The refs look reluctant, but they allow Hjammer to skate carefully back to his position for the faceoff in front of Crow, and a minute later Hjammer makes a spectacular diving save on Seguin’s shot from the point.

“Jesus Christ,” Carbomb mutters, next to Johnny on the bench. They’ve been grouped together for four-on-four with Saad and Leddy. “For a skinny beanpole, that kid is a brick fucking wall.”

He yanks Hjammer into a one-armed hug as he slides over the boards a few seconds later, and Hjammer winces.

“Ow.”

“Oh good,” says Carbomb. “You are human.”

Coach sends them out, and Johnny ignores his tired legs. He ignores his lungs’ burning protests, and his heart hammering in his ears with every burst of speed he forces into his stride.

He leads a rush and then pulls back just inside the line, turning out of reach of Causeway’s left wing -- he isn’t even noticing faces or numbers anymore -- and protecting the puck along the boards until he feels more than sees Carcillo come barreling in behind him. He throws a short pass through two sets of Causeway legs, but Carbomb fumbles it.

Johnny hears his *FUCK* as the puck gets batted away from him and he lunges to help; to block, create space, anything he can. Before he can, though, Saad is on top of them. He bulldozes a gap right through the Causeway forwards, picking up the puck and tearing for the net.

Johnny can’t breathe. He uses the momentary confusion to dart around his winger and head for the net, but he doesn’t even have time to get open before Saad fires.

Rask lunges, but it’s too late. The shot pings off the crossbar, bounces off the back of his shoulder, and in.

Everything feels suddenly very quiet, and very loud, all at once.

Saad hits the ice a split second after he gets the shot off, careening headfirst into Rask. Chaos ensues, but the refs are already waving the play good, and Johnny’s teammates spill over the boards and onto the ice, jostling and hugging and shouting as Crow skates down ice to meet them.
In the net, Rask is finally managing to untangle himself from Saad, who is shouting apologies as he hastily tries to extricate himself and get as much distance between them as he can.

He’s enveloped by the team as soon as he does, and over their collective shoulders, Johnny sees Rask upend a rack of sticks as he storms back to the dressing room after his teammates.

“One down!” Pat shouts, and Krugs and Fro echo him.

“One down!”

“One down!”

Johnny's legs feel like overcooked spaghetti, and all he wants to do is go back to the room and collapse, but instead he finds himself pulled into the group celebration. Emery grins at him and Johnny grins back, and something in his chest lightens.

Only two more to go.
“Are you gonna be okay?” Geno asks, and next to him, Patrice nods, mutely. “Really? Because you look like you about to puke.”

“No,” Patrice says, paper-white and thin-lipped, staring straight ahead. “No, no, I’m great. Really.”

“We don’t have to watch,” Geno persists. He reaches out and grabs Patrice’s hand, tugging until Patrice turns and looks at him. “Seriously. We can still leave. Go to movies, maybe, or play video games at your house.”

“No,” says Patrice. “No, I need to be here. I have to watch, even if we lose -- especially if we lose -- just to...I don’t know. Be there for the guys, I guess. It would be super shitty if I ditched them during an elimination game in the final round of playoffs.”

“You’re a good friend,” Geno tells him, quietly. “Good captain.”

Patrice shrugs, but something in his expression eases, just shy of a smile. “It’d be better if I could be down there, playing with them.”

“Doctor say you play in game three,” Geno says, resolutely. He tugs Patrice’s hand, and leads him up into the stands. “You play next game.”

“If there is a next game,” Patrice mutters. “Oh hey, there’s Mom and Dad.”

Sure enough, his parents are sitting in the next section of bleachers, a few rows back from the glass. His dad catches sight of them and waves, and Patrice raises his hand in a halfhearted salute.

“Geno,” Patrice’s mom says, getting up to make room. They’ve got a couple of old stadium blankets folded up to cushion the hard metal surface. “You look great. I like the jacket, very snazzy.”

“Oh my god, Mom,” Patrice groans, taking the seat next to his dad and patting the blanket next to him for Geno to sit. “Nobody says ‘snazzy’.”

“I think I just did,” says his mom, primly. She grins at Geno.

Geno grins back, puffing out his chest to show off the new Letterman jacket complete with his number, and the C emblazoned on the chest.

“I think you right,” he tells her. “Snazzy the only real word for it.”

Patrice groans. “I’m freaking out here, and you guys are not helping. Come on, the game is going to start in like, three minutes.”

“Oh,” says his mom, clutching her chest. “Mercy me, you poor, delicate thing. How could we ever be so insensitive? Gerard, hurry and get the smelling salts.”

Patrice glares at her, as his father chuckles, and Geno tries desperately to keep a straight face.

“Look,” he says, for a distraction. “There teams! Almost time now.”

“Yeah,” says Patrice. He looks like he wants to barf, again. “There they are.”

Geno slips an arm around his waist, tugging him close and planting a kiss on his cheek.
“Is okay,” he murmurs, nose buried in Patrice’s hair where it curls gently behind his ear. “Everything will be okay.”

Patrice nods, mutely. He leans into Geno’s side and stays there, stiff as a board, for the duration of the first period.

The shots are evenly matched, as are the goalies. Rask seems to have collected himself after the last game, and now he hunkers down in the net mouth, eyes set behind the cage of his mask and stick tapping the ice as play congregates in Madison’s end.

When they’d come to watch the first game of the series, Patrice had nearly taken Geno’s arm off, gripping tighter and tighter with every lost chance by Causeway, or goal by Madison. Now, though, he seems to have sunk in on himself, keeping a running litany of what sounds like a combination of prayers and swearing.

“Breathe,” Geno reminds him, with two minutes left to go in the first, and the score still deadlocked at zero. “And maybe blink, too.”

“I’m fine,” Patrice says, for the millionth time in the last ten minutes, still not taking his eyes off the game. “Fuck, Marchy, shoot, you little fucker! He’s holding onto the puck too long, they have too much time to block him. Do you see this?”

“I see,” says Geno, placidly, while on their other side, Patrice’s parents wince and groan as Segs hits the post.

“Fuck!” Patrice shouts.

“Language,” says his dad, but he doesn’t sound like his heart is in it.

On the ice, Shaw takes the puck for Madison on a sloppy turnover by Causeway. He wheels at the blue line and throws a pass straight across the neutral zone to an already streaking Bickell.

“Fu-- Crud!” Patrice yells, shooting a glare over at his father, but it’s too late. The goal horn sounds over raucous yells of the Madison supporters, and Bickell gets buried under a heap of celebrating teammates.

Geno groans, tightening his arm around Patrice, who’s still taut as a bowstring against him.

The score stays one-zip for Madison going into the second. Patrice’s parents get up during intermission and come back with some popcorn and drinks, which Patrice waves off, wordlessly. Geno eyes the popcorn over his head, but politely declines Mrs. Bergeron’s offered bag out of solidarity.

Something changes in the second.

It’s a change Geno is familiar with, without even having to be down on the ice playing to understand. He sees it in the set of the Causeway guys’ shoulders, and in the way the ice suddenly seems to open up around them; one smart takeaway leading to a chance, leading to a rebound. Win the faceoff. Take the shot. Cycle. Regroup.

Suddenly Madison is chasing, scrambling, blocking. Toews loses another faceoff to Krejci, and his wingers scramble to position along the boards, but too late. Krejci pulls it back to Krug at the blue line, who rifles a perfect shot right over Crawford’s shoulder, into the back of the net.

Patrice yelps and Geno whoops, and around them the stadium erupts again in a mingled chorus of
cheers and groaning.

“Feel better, kiddo?” Patrice mom yells, over the racket.

Patrice makes a face at her, but he laughs when she makes one back, reaching over to ruffle his hair.

“Yeah,” he says, “but I’ll feel better when we get a few more like that.”

Nevertheless, Geno can feel him relax more by increments as play continues. The momentum is inarguably in Causeways’ favor now, and Geno is waiting for it when Seguin easily deflects a centered pass that slips in five-hole on an irate Crawford.

“Oh my god,” Patrice shouts into Geno’s ear, gripping his arm and shaking him as Geno laughs. “Oh my god, I want to be down there playing so bad.”

“Next game,” Geno repeats, grinning.

Patrice swats him. “Don’t jinx us!”


In Patrice’s defense, Geno completely understands the anxiety that accompanies a lead like this.

“Just stay ahead,” Patrice groans to nobody in particular, as Toews and Krejci line up again to start the third period. “Don’t let them mess with you, just stay the fuck ahead, you idiots.”

“Patrice.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

Madison is getting desperate, and it doesn’t suit them. In Geno’s opinion, that’s what you get for spending most of the season on top of the standings. They’re out of practice playing from behind, and they get mad, and they get sloppy.

Actually, it’s pretty funny to watch. Instead of screwing their heads on straight, collecting themselves, and doing anything remotely organized, they stop communicating and start icing the puck every other play. The result is the slowest third period Geno thinks he’s ever witnessed, on the ice or off.

The clock ticks down, and with a minute and a half left to go, Causeway gets called for too many men. Madison pulls their goalie, and makes it six on four.

“ARE YOU FREAKING KIDDING ME?” Patrice shouts, jumping to his feet so fast the he nearly knocks Geno over in the process.

He storms down the row, stomping past a couple of gleeful-looking girls in Madison hoodies, and plasters his face against the plexi.

“Uh,” Geno says, looking from him to his parents, who are both wearing expressions of mild amusement. “I guess I’m gonna…”

He follows Patrice, shuffling carefully past Mr. and Mrs. Bergeron, and the Madison girls.

“I’m going to fucking murder them all, if they blow this game for a penalty like that,” Patrice mutters darkly, without looking away from the action on the ice. Madison has their power play set up in Causeway’s zone, but they’re still obviously struggling. Even as Geno watches, Lucic swipes the
puck from Carcillo and bats it down the ice just wide of Madison’s empty net.

“AIM, FUCKHEAD, AIM!” Patrice yells, and glares over as Geno snickers at him. “What about this is funny to you?”

“Nothing,” Geno says, hurriedly, squeezing his hand. “You tell them.”

“Keep patronizing me right now,” Patrice tells him, squeezing his hand back. “See how that goes for you.”

Geno waits until Patrice’s attention has returned to the ice to make a face at him.

Seguin misses the empty net, too, while Patrice screams himself hoarse. Kruger tries to make a play in over the line, but he fumbles the drop-pass to Frolik, and things devolve into a pile up along the boards.

Fifteen... Geno counts silently along with the clock, as Patrice dances up and down beside him, banging on the glass. Fourteen...

Carcillo comes away with the puck, but he loses it to Marchy, who loses and edge and stumbles.

Ten...

Segs collects it, but he’s ploughed along the boards with a well-aimed hit by Madison’s left defenseman.

Seven...

Madison’s defenseman fires off a well-aimed shot, but Thornton throws himself sideways to block it before it even gets near Rask.

Five...Four...

The clock winds down with chaos erupting over the loose rebound.

“Oh my god,” says Patrice. “Holy shit.” He looks shell-shocked. Even paler and more surprised than when he’d watched his team lose the first game.

“Don’t let your team hear you sound so surprised,” Geno says, leaning in to be heard over the racket the Causeway supporters are making. He turns to see the Madison girls stalking off toward the exit, joined by a growing, equally disgruntled red-wearing crowd.

“Shut up,” Patrice says, laughing. He punches Geno in the arm once, and then jumps on him, flinging his arms around Geno’s shoulders and dancing them around. “We won! Dude, we actually fucking won!”

“You won!” Geno echoes. “You playing in game three!”

“Fuck yes I am!”

Patrice’s father clears his throat loudly behind them, and Patrice grimaces apologetically, still grinning.

“Congratulations,” says his mom, pulling him into a tight hug. She hugs Geno, too, catching him by surprise. “You’ll come sit with us again, to watch him play?”
“Yes, I come!” Geno says, ignoring Patrice’s embarrassed groan.

“We’ll see you then,” says Mr. Bergeron. “Patrice, are you coming home with us, or going out?”

Patrice glances at Geno, who shrugs. “Going out, I guess,” he says. “Segs said he was going to have a thing, regardless of whether we won or lost.”

“Will his mother be there?” asks his mom.

“...Maybe?” says Patrice. He grins, hopefully. “We have to play again in two nights. Nobody’s going to do anything stupid, even if she’s not. We know better.”

“Right,” says Mr. Bergeron.

Mrs. Bergeron says, “Last time you said something like that, you came home with a black eye.”

Geno does his best to look very interested in an advertisement for a pizza chain on the far boards.

“That was months ago,” Patrice mutters. “Seriously, I’m fine, Mom. We’ll be fine.”

His mother relents, stepping back with a resigned sort of nod. “Alright. Well, call us, if you need anything. Geno, you won’t be drinking, right?”

“Right,” says Geno, hurriedly. “No drink and drive, promise.”

She hugs him, catching him off guard before she moves on to catch Patrice.

“Mom,” he groans, but he hugs her back and lets her brush his hair back off his forehead.

“I like your parents,” Geno says, as they make their way out to the car a couple of minutes later. “They good parents.”

Patrice glances at him. “Yours aren’t?”

“Not what I said,” Geno says. He unlocks the passenger side door first, holding it open for Patrice. “My Mama is best. Your parents, they different kind of good.”

“They are,” Patrice agrees. “You remember how to get to Segs’ house?”

He directs Geno the short distance across town, and by the time they get there, the party is already well underway. Geno can hear bass-heavy music pumping through the quiet cul de sac, making the windows rattle on either side of the front door as they let themselves in.

“Seguin’s neighbors must hate him,” Geno says, glancing at the darkened windows of the homes on either side.

“Someone called the cops once last year,” Patrice says, sheepishly. “Otherwise, nobody seems to care too much, if we cut the loud music and stuff by around midnight.”

“Bergy!”

Geno still has some trouble recognizing Patrice’s teammates out of uniform, but he’s pretty sure the short kid bounding toward them is Krug. He latches onto Patrice’s arm, hauling him down the hall and chattering a mile a minute.

“You came! We weren’t sure, I think Segs said he texted you. Did you get a text? Whatever, you’re
here. You saw the game, right? You were there? Oh my god, dude, we’re playing game three and you’re going to play with us! You are, right?”

“Let him breathe, kid.” Marchy elbows Krug out of the way, tugging Patrice into a one-armed hug and fist-bumping Geno. “He’s right, though, yeah? You’re playing with us in a couple nights?”

“Yeah,” says Patrice. He’s practically glowing, accepting hugs and fist-bumps and slaps on the back as more of his teammates collect around them in the hallway. Over their heads, Geno can see Seguin hanging back on the outskirts. He glances up and their eyes meet for an instant before he looks away again, disappearing back toward the kitchen.

“We fucking got this!” Marchy shouts, and their teammates echo it, herding Geno and Patrice with them into the dining room.

Geno politely waves off a couple of drink offers, gravitating toward some room-temperature pizza bites while Patrice does a couple of tequila shots with Krejci and Lucic. The TV is on across the room, and he’s so distracted by the Futurama rerun playing there that he doesn’t even notice Patrice’s return, until he gets a wet kiss laid on his cheek.

“Hi there,” says Patrice.

Geno grins. “Hi. You drunk already?”

Patrice reaches down, tangling their fingers together and leaning in heavily against Geno’s shoulder. “Nah. It was just a couple shots. I’m just happy.”

He looks up, and Geno leans down to kiss his grinning mouth. It’s still a little weird, making out like this in crowded rooms full of friends and teammates and whoever it is that wolf-whistles across the room at them.

They break apart, Patrice blushing as he laughs and grabbing for a wadded up napkin to lob at Krug, who dodges easily and sticks out his tongue.

“You guys are adorable,” he calls, ducking behind Thornton as Patrice grabs for another napkin.

“Wanna go somewhere less...here?” Patrice asks, glaring significantly in the direction of his sniggering teammates.

“We just get here, you want to leave already?”

Patrice smirks. “Not what I meant. Here, c’mon.”

He grabs Geno’s hand again, tugging him back down the hall. There’s a staircase leading off the main entrance, and Patrice glances to make sure they’re alone before leading Geno upstairs.

“This okay?” Geno asks. “You sure?”

“After all the crap Segs has pulled on me over the years?” Patrice snorts. “Yeah, I’m sure. Here, there’s a guest room down the hall, on the left.”

He leads them inside, letting go of Geno’s hand to fumble around in the dark. There’s a click, and the room is illuminated with the low, warm glow from a lamp on the nightstand. Patrice is sitting on the bed, watching him.

“Wanna lock the door behind you?” He asks.
Geno reaches behind himself, groping until he finds the doorknob. He’s hot all over, suddenly, except for his palms, which have gone suspiciously clammy. Patrice is watching like he knows, with the same sort of blazing determination in his eyes that Geno saw there before the game earlier. Before the anxiety and greenish tinge of panic had set in.

“Your ribs—” Geno starts, and Patrice groans.

“Are fine,” he says. “Seriously, they have been fine, for like, a week. I’m playing day after tomorrow. You think the doctor would’ve cleared me, if they weren’t?”

Geno rolls his eyes. “Fine. No more trying to be nice. Sorry I try.”

“Good,” says Patrice.

“Fine.”

They look at each other from across the room for a long, silent moment, before Patrice giggles, flopping over and burying his face in the pillow.

“Oh my god, just come over here, already.”

The room around them is muffled, but he can still feel bass reverberating through the carpet under his feet as he goes. He hasn’t had a drink all night, but his nerves are a lightheaded buzz as he kisses Patrice again. It’s a feeling like being simultaneously too close to focus, and never near enough, the way Patrice rises to meet him, twines around him until they tangle together and overbalance back onto the blankets.

“You’re hard,” Patrice mumbles against his mouth, a few, or maybe a lot of minutes later, and Geno nods.

“You, too.”

Patrice rolls his hips in agreement, giving an appreciative nod. “Yeah.”

“You want me to..?”

He gropes around for Patrice’s fly, and Patrice shifts enough to make it easier for him. It takes a minute or two of awkwardly struggling with button and zippers, but Patrice’s moan when Geno gets a hand on him is worth it.

“God, how are you so good at that,” he says, almost a whine where his face is buried against Geno’s neck. “It’s not fair.”

Geno laughs, curling fingers around him and giving him a couple of warm-up strokes. “Not doing anything fancy,” he says, modestly.

“That’s what I mean,” Patrice says, a little breathless when he flops back to fix Geno with a somewhat glassy stare. “Why can’t you just always be touching me?”

“Always?” Geno asks, pointedly innocent as he strokes his thumb over where Patrice’s dick is starting to leak.

Patrice makes a strangled hiccuping noise and nods. “Smug asshole.”

Geno beams down at him before kissing him again, wet and deep. He loves how Patrice opens up for him; the distracted way he sucks on Geno’s bottom lip as he starts to get desperate, hips working
up into Geno’s fist.

“Fingers?” Geno mumbles against his mouth, and Patrice moans in agreement.

“Hang on,” he says, breathlessly. He leans back, shimmying out of his jeans and nearly kneeing Geno in the nuts in the process. “Sorry, sorry! Here.” Patrice digs in the back pocket of his discarded pants, holding out a little pink sample-sized bottle of lube and beaming. “Courtesy of my health class last week.”

Geno snorts a laugh, popping the cap and squeezing some onto his fingers. “You always so prepared.”

Patrice blushes again, going pink to the tips of his ears and reaching into his pants pocket again, smirking as he holds up a condom. “Yup.”

Geno opens and closes his mouth. His brain is doing an unfortunate buzzing white noise thing, like confused bees.

“Oh god,” Patrice groans, misreading his silence and burying his face in the pillow. “Shit, I though-- Or no, I guess I didn’t think. But after last time--”

“No, is good,” Geno blurts. He feels profoundly stupid. Patrice probably wants this to be all special, and he’s totally fucking it up with his stupid brain-turned-beehive. “I want.”

Patrice turns his head, watching Geno with one dark, calculating eye. “For real?”

Geno barely manages not to roll his eyes, leaning back down instead to kiss Patrice again.

“You wanna be on bottom?” He asks, trying not to let his voice betray his nerves.

Patrice shivers and nods. “I think, yeah. Is that okay?”

“I never do either before,” Geno says. Under him, Patrice is shivering slightly, even as warm as the room is around them. He shifts his legs apart as Geno starts to explore up the bare skin of his thigh. “Only one way to find out.”

Patrice giggles, but the sound disintegrates into a groan as Geno finds his rim, rubbing slicked up fingers over it. This is the part Geno knows, by now. The way Patrice starts to get all sweaty and twitchy against him, biting at his lips between kisses, the more Geno plays around.

“You are such a tease,” Patrice grumbles against his mouth, even as his hands have dropped, and he’s groping Geno’s ass through his jeans, trying to drag him closer.

“You like,” Geno says. He waits another beat, and then presses in with two fingers.

He’s a little annoyed that he didn’t bother taking off his own pants before starting this, but at least this way he’s less tempted to do something that’ll end things before they even get out the gate.

He presses in again, fucking Patrice with his fingers until Patrice is arching off the bed, panting and swearing. His tshirt is damp where he’s got precome on it. Geno leans down, licking up the length of his dick and mouthing over the head, craving the heavy, salt-sharp taste on his tongue, the familiarity and the newness all at once.

Patrice makes that hiccuping noise again, pushing at the top of Geno’s head. “Dude, dude,” he pants, squirming as Geno’s fingers twist deep inside him. “I don’t wanna-- Not yet, okay?”
Geno pulls off, licking his lips and enjoying the way Patrice’s eyes go all glazed over, watching him. “Kay,” he says. “You ready?”

Patrice nods, mutely. He helps Geno out of his pants with fumbling hands, and tugs his own shirt off, tossing it aside.

He’s still all rounded edges to Geno’s sharp angles, but he’s more muscular than when they first started doing this, and Geno has been noticing lately that Patrice doesn’t need to crane up nearly as high on tiptoe to kiss him standing.


Geno shakes his head, digging through the piles of discarded clothes for the condom. “You tell me if you don’t like, right?”

“Um, yeah, dude,” Patrice says, snorting. “I think you’ll know, trust me.”

He can’t seem to look at Patrice as he rolls the condom on, busying himself with squeezing out some more lube. “On your back, or..?”

“No, here.” Patrice worries his lip between his teeth a second, thinking, before getting to his knees and leaning forward against the headboard. “I’ve always wanted to try it like this.”

He glances back over his shoulder and grins, and Geno doesn’t think he’s ever been more turned on in his life.

He gets to his knees, fitting himself up behind Patrice and dropping a kiss behind his ear. Patrice hums happily, arched and inviting, and Geno thinks he could come so easily just like this, pressed in tight and grinding his achingly hard dick up against the curve of Patrice’s ass. Patrice’s legs shift apart for him and he grinds back, reaching around and digging fingertips into Geno’s thigh until they’re moving together.

“Fuck,” he’s panting, over and over until it doesn’t even sound like a word anymore. “Fuck, G, I love you. I love you so, so much it’s stupid.”

Geno nods, burying his face against Patrice’s neck, smelling shampoo and tasting clean sweat on his lips as he echoes, “Love you, love you, love you.”

He plants another kiss there, and lines up their hips. It’s not exactly smooth, like in the considerable amounts of porn he’s watched since they started dating. He has to fumble around, missing a couple of times and making Patrice snicker, finally reaching back to guide him.

“Need me to draw you a map?”

“Need you to shut smart mouth,” Geno retorts, and Patrice laughs again. Then he groans.

“Oh god, yeah. That’s it, just like that.”

“You sure? You sure I don’t need map?”

“Shut up, Malkin.” Patrice is breathless, head dropping forward between his elbows. “Yeah, just...Go kinda slow at first.”

Geno wishes he could kiss him. That’s the one major flaw in this arrangement that he can locate, and it’s a little weird not being able to make out with his boyfriend while they fuck for the first time. Not
that he’d have the coordination for it, even if they could. It’s taking all his concentration to stay slow and steady like this, when every nerve in his body is begging more, more, more.

He settles for biting Patrice’s shoulder, at the place where it gently curves to meet his neck. Not hard enough to hurt, but enough that Patrice stiffens against him, moaning wordlessly against his own forearm.

“Keep doing that,” he mumbles, and Geno does, biting him again, harder, and sucking over the mark.

Patrice’s whole body seems to respond, going taut, and then relaxing under Geno’s mouth as he moves down the curve of Patrice’s shoulder. The stiffness in his hips is easing, and he rides back to meet Geno on the next thrust.

It’s good. Geno is afraid to let him think about it too hard, it’s so good. He takes Patrice’s hand on his hip as an invitation, and rolls his hips experimentally, giving an extra grind and dragging a little, “Fuck!” out of Patrice.

“Good?”

Patrice nods. “Really good.”

Geno speeds up a little more, and Patrice’s fingers dig in almost painfully hard to the soft flesh of his thigh. He can feel his own orgasm building, even as he’s desperately trying to push it back, drag this out a little longer.

His fingers find Patrice’s dick, hard and leaking again between his legs. He wraps his hand around it, tight, the way Patrice likes, and lets the movement of their hips do the rest of the work, jacking Patrice into it as Geno fucks into him.

Geno bites him again, sharp and sucking, enough to leave a mark, and Patrice comes all over his hand without warning.

“Holy shit,” Patrice gasps, sounding as surprised as Geno feels. He trails off into a moan as Geno jerks him through it. “Are you..?”

Geno nods silently against his neck, letting the orgasm ripple through him. It’s different than with Patrice hands, or his mouth. There’s something deeper, slower, like it’s being dragged out of him until he’s shaking with it, hanging onto Patrice’s hips as it pulses through both of them.

“Wow,” says Patrice, quietly. “I felt that.”

Geno makes an inarticulate noise, nodding. “Me too.”

“Wanna lie down?”

Geno slides out of him, earning an indignant little yelp from Patrice. “Sorry,” he says, thoughts still hazy and sex-stupid.

“Just feels weird,” says Patrice. He flops down on top of the blanket, and holds arms out for Geno. “’S okay, though.”

Geno lies next to him, arranging himself in the circle of Patrice’s arms and taking the opportunity to finally kiss him on the mouth; slow and deep and lazy. “Was good?”
“So good,” Patrice says. “So fucking good.”

Geno can feel it when Patrice smiles against his mouth.
May: Patrice

Patrice has never missed hockey like he’s missed it after getting injured. Skating at practices in the weeks before the final aren’t the same. Nothing is the same as this, on the ice with Segs and Marchy, and feeling that singular, bone-deep satisfaction as his shot hits the back of the netting behind Crawford.

Johnny evens the score in the second period, and Patrice grits his teeth and gets back on the ice.

It’s so much easier to be down here playing, too busy to think, than it was watching a couple nights ago. He forces himself not to look up at Geno and his parents in the stands, where he knows they’re watching. He forces himself not to look at the clock, or the scoreboard, or anything that isn’t this game, on the ice, right in front of him.

The rest of the team seem to be on the same page. With the score tied, things buckle down again, and Patrice plays what feels like an endless number of defensive minutes, bouncing back and forth across the neutral zone.

The room is quiet during the second intermission.

“How’re your ribs?” Looch asks, leaning over Davy re-taping his stick between them.

Patrice shrugs. “A little sore if I bounce around too hard, but pretty okay.”

“How about?” Davy laughs, setting his stick aside and lobbing the wadded up ball of old tape across the room, where it hits Danny’s leg and sticks there. Danny rolls his eyes, peeling it off and tossing it into the garbage can next to him before returning to his muttered conference with Thorty.

“Is that what you’re calling what Bickell did to you out there?”

“I got you the puck, didn’t I?” Patrice says, with dignity, as Looch snickers.

“Bounce around?” Segs says, from his other side.

Patrice rounds on him. “Better than taking stupid hooking penalties. I didn’t need to be avenged, dude. I know their powerplay is trash, but everyone needs to stay the hell out of the box, no matter what.”

“Who said I was avenging anyone?” Segs mutters. “You wish I liked you that much.”

Patrice gives his helmet a couple of pats before standing up, stretching. “C’mon,” he says. “It’s about that time.”

There’s a small part of Patrice that, all desperation and anxiety aside, is fully aware of how much fun this game is. He’d been expecting a grind, truth be told. One of those endlessly long, grueling games like they’d had against Consol, maybe, with everyone just trying to wear each other down.

He can’t remember the last time he’d skated this fast, or for this long, and he’d never admit it, but he’s actually grateful for the few weeks’ rest. That is, until the lapse in conditioning catches up to him, and he seriously considers puking between his feet after a particularly long shift chasing the puck around Madison’s end.

He groans, reaching for his water bottle and looking up just in time to see Looch score. The whole bench erupts around him, even as he can still hear Coach’s shouts of, “Settle down, settle down! We
still have nearly half a period left to play!”

Nobody takes much notice, though. Segs is latched onto Patrice’s arm, dancing up and down. He and Marchy nearly tackle Looch and Davy as they return to the bench, sweating and beaming.

The game shifts. It quickens in the ends. Now it’s less of a fight back and forth through neutral, and more of a long-winded ping pong match from one net to the other. Patrice fires a one-timer from Marchy, but Crawford seems to have expanded to twice his normal size, and he doesn’t even give up a rebound when Segs nearly dives into his lap.

Madison wins the faceoff as play resumes, and Patrice has to race to help his defensemen out down low as they scramble to clear a lucky giveaway.

Between shifts, the bench has gone quiet, everyone craned out over the boards and watching. Marchy is muttering something that sounds suspiciously like prayer.

Madison scores.

Patrice sees it like he knows what he’s watching before it happens.

Johnny has the puck, but he gets caught along the boards by Thornton and it slips between both of their skates. Madison’s defenseman pounces before either of them can recover, swatting it to a perfectly placed Bickell, who looks more surprised than anyone when it goes in.

The stands erupt in a mix of groans and cheering, groups of kids in Madison red gaining some of their lost enthusiasm back and waving signs Patrice doesn’t try to read.

Instead, he allows himself a sidelong glance up to where he knows his parents and Geno are watching. Geno is wearing a bright yellow Causeway scarf, and Patrice’s heart does something stupid and swoopy in his chest. He forgets his nerves. He forgets everything beyond the last remaining seconds of the game, and his resolve to win.

Davy wins the faceoff at center ice and throws the puck back to Johnny B., who passes it up ice to a streaking Danny tearing along the left boards toward the Madison end. Madison’s defense is waiting for him. He gets pinned, and the puck shoots loose, picked up a split second later by one of Madison’s ridiculously small underclassmen third-liners.

Patrice is yelling. He’s aware of it, distantly, but for all the good it does him. The guys next to him on the bench of shouting along with him, the crowds in the stands are in chaos. He can’t even hear himself think.

Looch lunges for the kid as he hauls ass back in the direction they’d come, but he’s a split second off, and his check only catches the kid off-balance as he sends a perfect pass through traffic to his linemate. His linemate, an even smaller kid with a bunch of messy dark hair sticking out from under his helmet, barely avoids Davy and ducks around Danny and fires and…

Patrice is weirdly aware of how messy the kid’s hair is, how oversized his jersey looks. He doesn’t want to see anything else, as the kid is immediately piled on by his teammates to celebrate a goal Patrice doesn’t want to acknowledge.

On either side of him along the bench, his teammates have all gone stonily silent. Even Marchy has stopped muttering; Segs looks like he’s been hollowed out and is just waiting for a strong gust of wind to pick him up and carry him away.

“A minute left,” Coach shouts, and Patrice feels a hand on his shoulder, jostling him back to reality.
“One fucking minute to fix this, c’mon. Bergeron, move. Get out there.”

He comes back to himself just in time to realize Tuukks is tearing toward them on the bench. He vaults over to take his place as the sixth attacker, and holds the puck in at the blue line. The crowd is roaring in his ears; there are groups of kids in yellow and red migrating down to press themselves against the glass, but he doesn’t let himself look up at them.

Patrice gets the puck, he passes to Looch, who passes to Davy, who shoots, and Danny collects the rebound. He drops down low to cycle, and barely avoids getting pasted by one of Madison’s defensemen. The underclassmen are gone, and Patrice finds himself tangled up with Johnny down low near Crawford, fighting for a puck he’s lost sight of in the scrum erupting around him. That’s where he is when the final buzzer sounds, and all he can see is the look of shock and elation dawning over Johnny’s face as they both freeze mid-battle.

He’s aware, distantly, of leaving the ice. Nobody says anything much in the dressing room, except Coach.

“You should feel good about yourselves,” he says, glaring down Segs’ eyeroll and ignoring the scattered groans around the room. “I mean it. That was a good, hard game tonight, and you played well. You’ve got nothing to be ashamed of.”

Tuukks throws his helmet across the room, where it hits the far wall and clatters to the floor at Krug’s feet. Krug, halfway through stripping off his own pads, looks too afraid to touch it. Khu reaches over to pat Tuukks’ shoulder, but Tuukks shrugs him off.

“It was a good game,” Coach says, again. “I’ll see you all next week for the final team meeting.”

There’s a scattering of mutters around the room as he leaves, and finally Segs speaks up.

“That was bullshit.”

“How?” Danny asks, quietly. He’s staring straight ahead, slumped against his cubby still in full gear. “They won, fair and square.”

“We had it, though,” says Segs, and Patrice can identify with that note of desperate pleading under the rage in his voice. That feeling like, if he wants it bad enough, they can go back and reverse the call on the ice and get another chance.

“Coach is right, though,” says Looch. He looks resigned, adding, “I mean, I saw the sheets. We were close in shots, close in faceoffs, we didn’t get lazy or stupid or anything. We just--”

“Lost,” Marchy finishes for him, angrily.

“Yeah,” Looch says, mildly. “I’m just saying, there’s losing and there’s losing, and I think I’d feel a lot worse right now if we’d actually fucked up.”

“Dude, shut up,” says Davy. Looch glares at him and he glares back.

“Whatever,” says Looch, getting up and grabbing his towel. “I just don’t want to sit around feeling sorry for myself. Fucking sue me.”

He gets up and stalks off in the direction of the showers.

One by one the others either follow him or collect their things, heading out to the back parking lot with sweaty hair sticking out underneath hoodies and ball caps.
Patrice isn’t ashamed, he’s disappointed. Angry at himself and, though he’ll never admit it, at his teammates. He showers, going over every play in his head, every broken opportunity, trying to pinpoint the moments they’d failed or come up short.

“Bergy, you still in here?”

Davy’s voice echoes off the shower room walls, garbled under the sounds of streaming water.


“You’re still coming over, right?”

Patrice hesitates. “I don’t know…”

“You’re coming,” Davy says, forcefully. “No sneaking off to beat yourself up, come on. We’re ordering pizzas, and Boychuk’s brother got us booze.”

Patrice doesn’t want pizza, or booze.

“Can Malkin come?” He asks, shutting off the water and reaching for his towel.

“Sure,” says Davy.

“Are you and Looch done bitching at each other?”

“Probably not,” Davy says, but Patrice can hear the hint of a smile creeping back into his voice. “See you there, Berg.”

Patrice hears Davy’s footsteps disappearing back toward the dressing room, before he has time to argue back.

He dresses and collects his stuff, taking one more lingering look around the now empty room before heading for the back exit. It’s weird to think that he won’t be back here until the fall; that his life won’t have to revolve around games and practices for the next few months. There will be the end of year ceremonies, of course, and summer clinics and training, but the end of the season always has a way of leaving him feeling adrift without a compass. This year is no different.

Geno and his parents are waiting for him out back.

“Oh, honey,” his mom says, and his dad hugs him.

“You were amazing,” he says. “We’re so proud.”

Geno kisses his cheek.

Patrice mumbles, “Thanks.” He shuffles his feet on the tarmac, shifting the heavy gear bag on his shoulder.

“You want to put your stuff in the car?” Asks his mom, and Patrice nods.

“Davy wants me to come over,” he says, following and waiting as she unlocks the trunk. “Is that okay?”

His parents exchange a look.

“To spend the night?” Asks his dad, and Patrice nods.
“I think so. Geno, you’re invited, too. I think we’re just going to hang out. He said they’re ordering pizza.”

His mom sighs. “I suppose. But no going out, okay? Stay at Davy’s, and call us if you need a ride.”

“It’s not going to be crazy, Mom,” Patrice says, rolling his eyes. “We just-- We just lost.”

She reaches out and smooths the damp hair back off his forehead. “I know, sweetie,” she says, and the sympathy in her tone makes his stomach turn. “I just like a guarantee.”

“We’ll be fine,” he promises, glancing at Geno. “You’ll come, right?”

Geno nods. “I come.”

“Call us if you need us,” says his dad. “And be home by ten tomorrow morning, please.”

Patrice watches their tail lights disappear as he and Geno pull out of the lot in the opposite direction.

“You didn’t have to come, you know,” Patrice says, quietly.

Geno glances over at him, whites of his eyes flashing bright under street lights as they drive. “I wanted to, though.”

Patrice reaches over and grabs his hand on the shifter, squeezing. “Ugh, that sucked.”

“Yes,” Geno agrees. Hesitantly, he adds, “I know you probably don’t care, but it was good game.”

Patrice’s retort never makes it out of his mouth. He looks at Geno and Geno looks back, stopped at a light, and Patrice sighs.

“Thanks.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

Patrice leans in and Geno meets him halfway. It’s not the buoyant, electrified kiss Patrice had thought about in his endless fantasy over the past few weeks of taking the championship. It’s not the perfect cherry on top of what would have felt like a perfect year.

There’s nothing perfect about this; there’s none of the symmetry he’d felt poised to collect when a win had felt so inevitable. The idea is almost humiliating now, so he shoves it away, pushes it back because at least now, he’s got this.
June: Johnny

May turns into June through a series of soggy weeks that do nothing to dampen Johnny’s spirits.

They won. Madison Tech actually won the championship. There’s an enormous banner taking up the entire back wall of the cafeteria reminding them all of it daily, and the championship cup with their school name and year freshly engraved on it in a display case next to the main office.

Johnny hasn’t been able to walk to class without being waylaid for high-fives and slaps on the back and congratulations.

“Gonna repeat?” Some kid Johnny’s never even spoken to before asks him on his way to English class, with a big grin. “Make it two in a row?”

“I mean, we’re gonna try,” Johnny says, humbly, even as he feels his face getting hot. “Of course.”

“Damn right,” the kid says, bumping Johnny’s shoulder. “Catch you later, man.”

“Um, yeah. Definitely,” Johnny says to the kid’s already retreating back. He has the slightly hysterical urge to laugh.

He’s stopped again, this time by a hand on his arm.

“Sorry, I really gotta get to class,” he starts, but breaks off when he sees Pat there, smirking.


“God, shut up,” Johnny groans, laughing. “I am not signing autographs.”

“Whatever,” says Pat. Johnny’s pretty sure he’s been wearing the same shit-eating grin since the moment the last buzzer sounded on the championship game. “How’s it feel, everybody wanting a piece?”

“You tell me, Mister MVP,” Johnny retorts, pleased with the way Pat’s cheeks go all pink.

“Shut up,” Pat mutters. “Hey, I just wanted to ask, are you going to the end of year party next week?”

Johnny shrugs. “Maybe. Probably. I hadn’t really thought about it yet, why?”

“Just wondering,” says Pat. He fidgets with the cuff of his jacket where it’s starting to fray. “It’d be cool to see you there.”

“Oh,” says Johnny. Silences stretches between them, and Pat keeps fidgeting with his sleeve. “I’ll definitely try and make it, thanks.”

Pat brightens. “Yeah?”

“Yeah, totally.”

“Cool.” Pat’s grin is back.

“So, I gotta, um…” Johnny trails off, pointing around Pat to his classroom.
“Oh!” Says Pat, nearly stumbling into a pair of passing girls in his haste to get out of Johnny’s way. “Yeah, me too. I gotta, uh. Class.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny, stifling a laugh as the girls’ indignant glares soften when they realize who knocked into them. “See you later, hotshot.”

“Ha ha,” says Pat, but he doesn’t look the least bit abashed as he rejoins the thinning crowd of students disbursing to class.

Johnny thinks about the party over the next few days, finally bringing it up as he and Looch are wandering around a park on Thursday afternoon, ice cream cones in hand.

“Why wouldn’t you want to go?” Looch asks, plunking down on a bench and tilting his face toward the sun.

Johnny hesitates. “It’s stupid.”

Looch takes a bite of his ice cream. “Okay.”

Johnny glares, but Looch is still preoccupied with his ice cream and doesn’t seem to notice.

“I guess I’d just rather hang out with my friends,” Johnny says, at last. “Like, skip the whole big-crowd thing. There’s been so much of that this year, already. I’m kinda over it.”

“Awww,” Looch drawls, turning a chocolatey grin on Johnny. “All that fame getting to you, already?”

“That is not what I meant,” Johnny grumbles, taking a big bite of his own cone and avoiding Looch’s eyes.

“Sure it is,” says Looch. This time, Johnny doesn’t bother to correct him.

“I told you it was stupid.”

“Nah,” Looch says. “Not that I’m like, at all sympathetic, or anything, but I know all that stuff isn’t really your jam.”

Johnny sighs. “It’s just... It’s a lot, you know? I just want to enjoy the end of the year with the team.”

“I get that,” says Looch. He leans over against Johnny’s shoulder, and Johnny lets him hesitate, feels him tense and pause before turning his head to meet Johnny’s lips.

The kiss is quick and sticky-sweet, tasting like chocolate fudge and butter-pecan. When they break apart, Looch steals a bite of Johnny’s ice cream.

“Wanna come with me?” Johnny asks. He thinks about stretching his arm out behind Looch on the back of the bench.

Looch smiles, and shakes his head. “Nah,” he says. “Not really my jam, either. Anyway, after playoffs it’d just be...”
“Awkward,” Johnny finishes for him. His arm stays where it is, between them. “Yeah, I know.” He eats some more ice cream, while Looch laughs. “God, speaking of which, Pat was bugging me about going to school the other day. It was so weird. I swear, I don’t remember him being that awkward when we were together.”

Looch’s eyebrows go up. “He bugged you about it?”

“No, I don’t know,” Johnny says. His ice cream is starting to drip down over his fingers, and he slurps it in hasty damage-control. “He just asked me if I was going.”

“Awkwardly.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “But that might’ve just been me, I dunno. He was probably just trying to be friendly.”

Looch snorts. “Friendly?”

“Yeah,” says Johnny, defensively. “I mean, I don’t think it’d be anything else. We won the championship together, and things’ve been pretty okay between us for awhile now. It’s... nice. I dunno.”

“Good,” says Looch. “That’s good.”

Johnny turns to look at him, eyes narrowed. “What?”

“What, what?” Looch asks. He pops the last few bites of cone into his mouth whole and chews loudly as Johnny watches.

“Don’t bullshit me, man,” Johnny says, elbowing him.

Looch chews and swallows, wiping himself off with a napkin before answering.

“C’mon, dude,” he says, sitting up so he can look Johnny squarely in the eyes. “I’m not the one bullshitting here, if you’re trying to tell me that your ex getting all friendly with you again is just him being nice.”

“I just meant it’s nice that we’re getting along now,” Johnny grumbles. He finishes his own ice cream, grabbing the napkins from Looch. “The first part of this school year really sucked.”

Looch nods.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, watching people pass. A breeze is starting to pick up as the sun sinks lower over the Madison skyline to the west, and their shadows stretch long on the pebbly tarmac at their feet.

“Did I tell you about the time Davy kissed me?” Looch asks at last, snapping Johnny back to the present from uncomfortable, conflicted memories.

“Um, no?” Johnny says. “Seriously? When was this?”

“Last summer,” says Looch. “We were at a thing at Thorty’s house, just a handful of us. We were both kinda drunk and we ended up alone out in the back yard.”

“And he just... kissed you? Just like that?”

Looch hesitates. “No. Or, not really. I told you, we were both drunk. We just started talking, I don’t
even remember exactly how it went. I think he asked me if I wanted to.”

Johnny’s eyes widen. “Wanted to kiss him?”

“Yeah,” says Looch. Discomfort looks strange on him; ill-fitting.

“So what’d you tell him?”

“I told him yeah, of course I did,” Looch says, quietly. “He’s my best friend, I didn’t want to lie. Anyway, it’s not like he didn’t know how I feel.”

Johnny tries to imagine being that comfortable with anyone. “And then he kissed you?”

“No,” says Looch. Johnny follows his gaze, watching the last sliver of blazing orange sun slip out of sight behind the distant buildings. “I told him I wanted it, but not if he didn’t want it, too.”

“Then why did he do it?”

Looch sighs. “He asked how he could really know for sure, whether he wanted it or not, unless he tried. He really meant it, too, I could tell, so I just... I told him yeah, do it. I remember how fucking scared I was, and how mad at myself, but I was also so goddamned hopeful, too, you know? Like, even if he wasn’t sure, I pretty much knew. But I just really, really wanted to be wrong.”


“We kissed,” Looch says, with a shrug. “And it was good, I guess. But it wasn’t... I dunno.”

Johnny winces. “It wasn’t what you wanted?”

“Oh, no,” Looch says, laughing. “I definitely wanted it, believe me. It’s embarrassing, how bad I wanted it, and how bad I wanted it to be great. He’s Davy. I’ve loved him since we were six years old. It just wasn’t what he wanted.”

“He told you that?”

Looch shakes his head. “Nah. I kinda wish, actually. No, we kissed, and then Marchy came outside and started yelling for us, so we went in and hung out, and we just never talked about it again.”

“You never talked about it again,” Johnny echoes, incredulously. “How the fuck does that even work?”

“He’s my best friend,” Looch says, again. “I won’t lie, I was fucking pissed as hell for a couple of weeks, but... he’s my best friend. I’d rather have that than nothing at all. I just let it go. At least now I know for sure, I don’t have to wonder what if.”

“Shit,” Johnny says. “Why are you telling me this, anyway?”

Looch sucks on his bottom lip. There’s still a smudge of ice cream he missed with the napkin by the corner of his mouth.

“Because,” he says, finally, “me and Davy are friends. It sucked that he did that, but we moved on. But dude, Pat isn’t your friend. Not like that. And he doesn’t deserve to hurt you twice.”

Johnny is so taken aback that he just looks at Looch stupidly until Looch starts to fidget.
“Thank you,” Johnny manages, at last.

Looch shrugs. “It’s just the truth.”


Looch gives his hand a quick squeeze before getting up, stretching. “Ready to head back?”

They walk back through the park to Johnny’s truck as the shadows lengthen further and finally turn to dusk around them. Johnny thinks about reaching for Looch’s hand, but he doesn’t do it. He doesn’t know what to do, or say, or even what to want.

“You should come with me to the party,” he says again, when they’re driving back through the darkening streets of Causeway.

Looch laughs. “Thanks, man, but seriously, I think it’d just be weird.

“I know,” says Johnny. “Sorry. I just really don’t want to deal with... anything.” He laughs, and Looch grins, as they pull to a stop at the end of Looch’s block.

“I hear you,” Looch says, sympathetically. “Hey, you’re still gonna come hang out with us over the summer, right? I mean, you and Bergy are still doing the soccer thing, and last summer a bunch of us did stuff almost every week. You should come, too.”

Johnny grins, wryly. “Sure, I mean, if the rest of them are cool with me being there.”

“Please,” says Looch, waving him off. “They’ll get over it.”

Johnny doesn’t know if he agrees with this, but he kisses Looch goodbye and lingers, idling at the corner as he watches Looch walk down the block, streetlights flickering to life around him.

He’s never been less sure what he wants.

--

On Saturday night, Johnny picks up Crow and drives them south along the lake to the beachfront property where one of the varsity basketball players is holding the end of year party.

It’s a far cry from the remote, windblown beach last fall, with a big pine-boarded house overlooking a rolling slope of grass ending in a wide pier. There’s a keg in the kitchen, and what looks like a bunch of people manning an expansive barbecue grill on the back deck.

Johnny gets a Coke and Crow gets a beer and they find their teammates down by the dock, flopped in the new spring grass under a big tree.

“You made it!” Bicks says, waving them over. Playoffs seemed to have relaxed his feelings toward Johnny, but he still makes a point of keeping himself between Johnny and Pat when he scoots over to make room.

Pat, for his part, holds a hand up in greeting, uncharacteristically quiet. “Hey.”

“We were just talking about which of the JV guys Coach is probably going to bring up next year,” Carbomb says, a few feet away, in the dark. His teeth gleam white as he grins. “Poor kids are gonna have some big shoes to fill.”

“I heard Fro is transferring,” Pat says. “His parents are moving out west somewhere.”
The debate picks up, picking over the various JV guys they’ve watched, or played with when they got brought up temporarily, and even a couple of incoming freshman some of the guys have heard about.

Johnny doesn’t say much, sipping his Coke in silence as his teammates argue comfortably back and forth around him. The party ebbs and flows, and Johnny watches crowds of Madison kids filter past, shouting and calling back and forth in high end of year spirits. There’s something less frenzied about it than he’d imagined, though, and he feels his initial reluctance fading.

“I’m gonna go grab another Coke,” he says, nearly an hour later. “Anyone else need anything?”

“Find chips,” says Carbomb, with scattered murmurs of agreement.

Johnny pushes to his feet, taking his time wandering through the house and collecting supplies. He’s nearly back, skirting past a cluster of cheerleaders to keep in the shadows, when he hears his name.

“Johnny.” It’s Pat, emerging out of the gloom behind some low bushes. “Hey, I was looking for you.”

“I was only gone a couple minutes,” Johnny says. “Why, did you need something? I think the keg is out, but I saw some Corona Lites in a cooler on the deck.”

“No, no,” Pat waves this off, shoulders set as he worries his lower lip between his teeth. “I just wanted to, uh, talk to you about something.”

Something in Johnny’s stomach drops, and his fingers tighten reflexively on the bag of Cheetos he’s liberated. “Okay.”

Pat shifts uncomfortably. In his head, Johnny can hear Looch’s voice.

He doesn’t deserve to hurt you twice.

“I miss you,” Pat blurts. “I mean it, Jon. I know I fucked up really bad before, I did so much stupid shit this past year, but I really, really miss you. I think about you all the time, and it fucking sucks.”

Johnny raises his eyebrows, and Pat rolls his eyes, sighing.

“You know what I mean. It sucks getting to be around you all the time, and play on the team with you, and go to school with you, while I miss you this hard.”

Johnny has played variations on this scene in his head countless times. He’s imagined it from every possible angle, so why, now that it’s happening, does he have no idea how to respond?

“Okay,” he says, slowly, because he thinks he might lose his mind and do something really, truly stupid, if Pat keeps standing there and staring at him like that.

“Okay?”

“No, I mean,” Johnny falters. He has an unopened soda in one hand and a bag of Cheetos in the other, and he gestures helplessly with the soda. “I just... don’t know what to say, man. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Pat looks as if he’s been slapped. “Sorry, nevermind, forget I said anything.”

“No,” Johnny says, a little too loudly. Some kids a few feet away glance over, before returning to their conversation. “I mean, yeah, I miss you, too. I miss us, and I think about it, kind of a lot. But, don’t you think... I dunno, do you ever think that maybe we miss what we wanted it all to be? Not,
like, what it actually was.”

Pat looks at him. “What?”

“I mean,” Johnny says, trying to sort his thoughts out of the swirling quagmire they’ve suddenly become. “Dude, you’ve gotta admit, we were never exactly great at being a couple. We wanted to be, and we really tried, but I really hated fighting with you all the time.”

“So we won’t fight!” Pat says, taking a step closer and reaching for Johnny’s hand. Johnny lets him take it, curling their fingers together as he stares imploringly up into Johnny’s face. “We’ll talk and shit. We’ll learn from our mistakes, do less stupid stuff. Come on, you can’t tell me you don’t at least want to give it a try.”

Pat’s face is so close to his, his blue eyes reflecting dull amber in the porch light behind them.

For once, Johnny knows what he wants.

He hesitates.

“Pat…”

Pat lets out a choked sound of frustration. “God, Jon, for fuck’s sake. For once in your life could you just stop thinking? If you want this, then let’s just--”

“I don’t, though,” Johnny says, and Pat stops dead, midsentence. “Pat, I’m sorry, I really am, but I can’t go through that again.”

Pat opens his mouth, but then closes it again. He takes a step back, dropping Johnny’s hand.

“Here.” Johnny holds the bag of Cheetos out, and Pat takes it without protest. “I think I’m going to just head out now. Could you make sure someone else gives Crow a ride back?”

“Yeah,” says Pat. His face has gone stony. “Sure.”

“Pat--”


“Thanks,” says Johnny.

They stand for another moment, silent and unsure, and then Pat turns and walks away back toward their friends, and it’s like something snaps. Something suddenly so tangible that Johnny’s pretty sure it’s been there all along without his noticing, only now…

It’s over. It’s done. He lets out a deep breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding, and walks back to his truck.
June: Geno

The sky is shifting from blue-gold to a sluggish, orangy haze that hangs low and silhouettes the uneven shrubbery bordering the Bergerons’ back garden. Geno watches fireflies start to blink and bob in the dusky gloom of the shadows it casts over the yard, and nudges Patrice in the shoulder, pointing.

“Fireflies, Patrice. Look.”

“Mm,” Patrice says distractedly, fiddling around with his phone where he’s perched a step below Geno, leaning against his legs.

Geno prods him again. “Spoiling romantic moment,” he gripes. “Candy Crush still be here after I leave.”

Patrice snorts haughtily, but pockets his phone. “I wasn’t playing Candy Crush, I was texting Segs. His mom has to go out of town for some conference thing, so I told him he can crash with me for a few nights next week.”

“Oh. Okay.” Geno tries not to let his tone betray him, but Patrice turns back to look at him, frowning.

“What?”

“Nothing,” says Geno, too quickly. “Is fine, if he come over.”

“I wasn’t exactly asking your permission,” Patrice says, in clipped tones. He narrows his eyes. “I know you don’t like him, but--”

“I don’t not like,” Geno starts, but Patrice snorts.

“I know he wasn’t exactly great about you and me, but he’s gotten better. He’s my best friend, G.”

Geno raises his eyebrows incredulously. “He get better?”

“It’s just going to take him some time.” Patrice sounds frustrated. “He’s just not used to having to share me with--”

“He’s jealous,” Geno blurts, and then flinches at the scathing look Patrice gives him.

“And he’ll get over it,” Patrice says, “because I’m not going to choose between you two. Maybe just try to, like, talk to him or something, next time we all hang out.”

Geno snorts. “I try before. He just ignore me, don’t even look at me.”

“He can be kind of a dick, I know,” Patrice concedes, sighing. “Just... don’t try and make me choose, okay? He’ll get his head out of his ass eventually.”

He reaches for Geno’s hand and squeezes it. “I’ll try and talk to him while he’s staying with me, okay? I really want you guys to get along.”

Geno squeezes back, heaving a deep sigh. “I guess I try harder. But only for you, Prince Patrice.”

“God, shut up.” Patrice elbows him in the thigh, giggling when Geno kisses him again.
It’s warm and humid, even for June, but in the narrow little back yard with its high walls and hedges, the heaviness in the air deadens out the sounds of next door’s television and the distant highway traffic-hum. It gives everything a sense of comfortable distance; nothing as important as the press of Patrice’s lips against his, or that contented little hum he makes as his fingers find their usual home curled against the curve of Geno’s neck.

“Parents still around?” Geno asks when they finally separate, Patrice shifting up a step to stay pressed in close with an arm around Geno’s waist. “Want to thank for dinner before leaving.”

Even at the weird angle, Geno can see the face Patrice makes, the way his mouth scrunches up.

“You leaving soon?”

Geno sighs. “Have to. Work early tomorrow.”

“Why can’t you just let yourself have, like, ten minutes of actual summer break?” Patrice groans. “Come on, can’t you trade shifts with your brother or something?”

“I do that too much already during school year,” Geno says, although he is genuinely sorry, especially with Patrice’s fingers sliding slowly and deliberately over the curve of his thigh. “Is my turn to give him break.”

“And my friends say I’m overly responsible,” Patrice grumbles.

He leans back in to kiss Geno again, deeper this time.

They make out until they’re breathless, Geno practically straddling Patrice’s lap by the time they pull apart for air. He’s intimately aware of the quick hummingbird flutter of Patrice’s pulse beating just beneath the skin of his neck, and the way his breath comes in short little bursts against Geno’s cheek when he says, “I wish you could just stay.”

Geno nods, shifting back a little to untangle them, but still pressing kisses down the curve of Patrice’s jawline. “Me too,” he says. “Always.”

“So, someday,” Patrice says, fingers curling and uncurling in the fabric of Geno’s t-shirt they way they always do when Patrice is trying to pretend he doesn’t think something is a big deal. “Right?”

Geno looks at him, and Patrice blushes.

“Right,” Geno agrees, trying to sound steadier than he feels. “Someday just us. We invite parents over for dinner, they go home after.”

There’s a moment’s hesitation before Patrice asks, “Maybe your parents, too?”

Geno takes in a long breath, studying his hands where they’re bright and pale against the dark material of his jeans in the quickly gathering dusk. “Been thinking about that,” he says finally, and feels Patrice go still against his side.

“G, I didn’t mean,” Patrice starts quickly, but Geno cuts him off.

“No, no, I knowing you not mean to--” he breaks off, sifting through jumbled turns of phrase for the right word, “pressure? Pressure. I know you not. But thinking about it a lot, and thinking maybe time to tell.”

He shrugs, attempting nonchalance. Next to him, he can feel Patrice staring.
“Really? Are you sure? I mean, what if they freak out?”

The sudden twist of anxiety across Patrice’s face exactly echoes all the thoughts ratcheting around in his head for the past few weeks as much as the words themselves do. He says, “I don’t know.”

Patrice frowns deeper. “You don’t know if you’re sure, or if they’ll freak out?”

“I don’t know,” Geno says again. “Both?”

“Maybe take more time?” Patrice suggests tentatively, but Geno just shakes his head.

“I’m thinking not matter if take time. Tell them now, tell them later, answer probably not so different.”

Patrice nods quietly, chewing on his lip for a moment before saying, “You know I won’t mind if you decide not to, right?”

Geno reaches over and gives his knee a squeeze, letting his hand rest there until Patrice covers it with one of his own. “I know,” he says. “And I want you to meet parents, is very important, but also important to me I tell them. Keeping such big secrets not good in family."

It’s easy to say it now, he thinks, here with only Patrice to listen and nod and hum in quiet agreement. He loves his parents, and Denis, who he’s much less worried about.

In the end, though, it doesn’t really feel like a choice. Every time he tries to smooth over the racing, worried thoughts, it only ever feels like putting a lid over a barrel of eels. His stomach still twists and roils with it, always staying close even when his mind is occupied with other things and he sometimes has to pause, try to remember the reason for this constant tug of nerves.

Patrice says, “Hey, you got quiet. You okay?”

“Yeah,” Geno says, even though it has to be written all over his face just how untrue that is. “Think telling sooner than later is best for everyone.”

“Get it over with?”

Geno nods. “Tomorrow.”

Patrice’s eyes get big. “Uh, do you, like. I mean. Should I be there? Do you want me to be there?”

The honest answer is yes, emphatically, but Geno’s already thought about this and he shakes his head. “I call you right after?”

“Sure,” Patrice says. He looks like he wants to argue, but he just nods once. “Sure, anything you need.”

Geno squeezes his hand and Patrice squeezes back, leaning over to press a kiss to Geno’s cheek. For a moment, Geno’s nerves quiet.

He can hear the sound of footsteps on the staircase just inside the door behind them, and Patrice’s mom calling something and then his dad’s distant reply. It’s fully dark now, and the steady hum of crickets is beginning to start up.

“Should go,” Geno says, but he doesn’t move.

“Yeah,” says Patrice, who doesn’t move, either.
They sit in silence for a long moment, Patrice’s thumb idly stroking the back of Geno’s hand. The fireflies blink brighter against the inky backdrop of the trees, fading and flashing erratically and making Geno feel like his eyes are playing tricks on him.

From inside, Patrice’s dad’s voice calls, “Boys? You still out there? It’s getting late.”

Geno can feel more than see Patrice rouse himself, straightening up and giving his shoulders a little shake. “Yeah,” he calls. “Be in in a sec.”

He stands, reaching down to help Geno up. Geno’s foot is asleep from where he was sitting with it halfway tucked beneath him, and the pins and needles follow him inside and down the hall where he collects his hoodie, keys, and wallet in the den. Gerard and Sylvie are in there, too, watching the late news on the couch with a bowl of popcorn between them.

“Thank you for dinner,” he tells them, and they both beam over the back of the couch.

“As always,” Gerard tells him, “thanks for doing all our dishes.”

Geno smiles sheepishly as next to him Patrice smirks and mutters something that sounds a lot like *kiss-ass.*

“See you soon?” Sylvie says, and Geno nods.

“Drive safe,” says Gerard, and they turn back to their program as Patrice shepherds him out onto the front stoop.

“You’ll call me tomorrow?” he asks, staring fixedly into Geno’s face. It’s the same thing he always asks; a perfunctory not-question there’s never a different answer to, but tonight the words have a heavy edge that cuts through the would-be routine goodnights.

“Of course,” Geno tells him. After the dark back yard and dimly lit hall, the yellow sodium glow of the porch light is a sharp adjustment for his eyes. He blinks, angling away from the glare, but Patrice solves the problem for him by leaning up and kissing Geno with a hand on either side of his face.

“Okay,” he says when they break apart. “Okay. Then yeah, um. Drive safe. Let me know when you get home.”

Geno kisses him again, soft and quick, and heads for his car. “Yes,” he agrees. “I text, no worrying.”

The last thing he sees as he backs out of the driveway is Patrice’s tense little smile, looking doubly strained in the washed-out light. Geno gets on the road and plugs his iPod into the car stereo, clicking the first playlist he finds and setting it to random, trying not to focus on the way his thudding heart seems to match the pop beat pounding through the ratly old speakers.
June: Patrice

It’s late when Patrice gets home. He shuts off the car and digs his phone out of his bag, checking his texts for the some-hundredth time in the last couple hours, and… still nothing.

He opens a text to Geno and stares at the blank box and the little blinking cursor til the screen goes blank, and then repeats the process, racking his brain for-- for what? What does he even say? Anything he can come up with sounds either stupid, insensitive, or insecure, or a big mix of all three, so in the end he just pockets the phone and heads inside.

“Hey,” he calls, dropping his bag on the stairs and wandering into the kitchen. Both cars are gone, so ostensibly both of his parents should still be out, but he’s been wrong before. “Mom, Dad?”

There’s no answer, so he grabs a Coke Zero and pads down the hall to the den thinking thoughts of late-night sitcom reruns, or maybe NHL Network replays. He’s so caught up up in his own thoughts that he doesn’t even see Geno until he’s practically sitting on him.

“Holy shit!” he yelps, slopping Coke on his sleeve and almost tripping back over the coffee table behind him. “G, what the fuck-- How did you even get in here?”

It’s dark, just the side lamp next to the couch turned on. Even in the warm glow Geno’s face looks pinched and pale, and his eyes are red-rimmed. “Your dad here when I come, go to meet your mom for movie but tell me stay, wait, you be home soon.”

“Yeah,” Patrice says, setting his can on a coaster and sinking down onto the couch beside Geno. His heart is sinking in slow motion, leaving a wake of sick, twisting dread that spreads through his whole body. “Yeah, I was supposed to be back a couple hours ago, but we were playing Xbox over at Marchy’s and--” he cuts himself off.

So not important right now. “What happened? Why didn’t you call me?”

Geno looks up and meets his eyes. He looks exhausted. “Didn’t know what to say.” He seems like he wants to be done, but Patrice just stares at him, so finally he shrugs. “I tell. Say I’m gay, or. Say I have girlfriends before, so cannot like boys now, not make sense.”

Patrice is pretty sure that none of this makes sense, still with that feeling like he’s missing some enormous, crucial piece of the puzzle.

“So,” he starts, drawing the word out and trying to catch Geno’s eyes again, for all the good it does
him. “They think you’re…confused?”

Geno nods.

“And because you had a couple girlfriends in the past, you can’t like guys?”

Geno nods again, but he glances up and rolls his eyes, and for a split second he looks like himself again. Patrice has the sudden and blinding urge to throw himself into Geno’s arms and to cling to the comforting familiarity, until he remembers with a sickening jolt just how backwards that is.

“More complicated than that,” Geno sighs, “but yeah. In Russia, better to just like girls if can like girls. Make less problem. Not harder for family. Dad say all this, say I just confused.” This time he spits the word like it’s bitter on his tongue, finally looking up to meet Patrice’s eyes, and his gaze is steady even as Patrice can see the rapid rise and fall of his chest. “Said he disappointed, he think I am good son. Just have to-- have to stop.”

His voice breaks and at the same time Patrice feels something in him snap like a hinge, the growing mass of fear and dread building in him this whole time tumbling into place.

“Oh,” he breathes. “And. And what did you say?”

Geno stares at him a moment. “Said that stupid,” he says plainly. “Told him not working like that, wake up and welcome to twenty-first century.”

“And?”

“And he say then I not welcome back until stop.”

Patrice breathes out. “Holy shit.”

“That the short version,” Geno mutters. His eyes are starting to look redder; shining and overbright. “Asked Mama to say something, tell him what he saying not make sense, but Mama say she agrees. Said she think I know better, maybe I take time, I think, and I make better choice.”

“So they kicked you out?” Patrice asks, incredulous. He starts forward in an aborted motion, stalls, and then thinks fuck it, grabbing one of Geno’s hands in both of his. It’s cold and heavy, but after a moment Geno’s fingers curl around Patrice’s and he gives a grateful little squeeze.

“No,” Geno says, but snorts derisively. “Say I not kicked out. Can come home any time, when I make right choices.”

“So you’re kicked out.”

Geno nods. He looks back up into Patrice’s face. “This not choice,” he says softly.

“I know,” says Patrice. The words sound hollow and stupid, but he can’t think of anything more profound to say.

“They don’t understand.”

Patrice says, “I know,” again, so quietly this time he’s not even sure Geno heard him until Geno nods, once, the tiniest jerk of his head.

The lamplight catches on the tear tracks coursing down Geno’s cheeks and Patrice is terrified. This is all so big, so much bigger than him or them or his safe, stupid little life that’s done nothing to prepare him for something like this.
Watching Geno cry, Patrice feels like he’s intruding on something indecent, intensely private; something that reduces his whole cushioned existence to an afterthought in the shadow of crushing reality. He’s so caught up in himself that he doesn’t even realize Geno’s moving until there are arms around him, pulling him in, tangling them together as Geno buries his face against Patrice’s neck, and by that time all Patrice can do is hang on.

He doesn’t know how long they stay like that, Geno hiccuping quietly, muffled against his shoulder, but eventually Patrice looks up to see both of his parents standing in the doorway watching them.

“Can Geno stay here tonight?” he asks, and his mom nods.

His dad says, “I’ll get the extra blankets from upstairs.”

Patrice has to swallow hard to keep down the lump in his own throat, just nodding mutely as Geno lifts his head, looking around at both of them.

“Thank you,” he says, sounding as small and miserable as he looks. He looks like a stranger, and Patrice has to glance away, concentrating on his hands in his lap.

“Do you need anything else?” Patrice’s mom asks, but Geno just shakes his head.

“Brought toothbrush,” he says simply. “Clothes, too.” He jerks his head toward the corner of the couch where for the first time Patrice notices Geno’s school backpack next to another, larger camping knapsack. Another queasy tide washes through him.

Patrice’s mom says, “Alright,” but he can see her eyebrows hike up as she sees the extra bag, too. “We’re going to bed soon, but let us know if there’s anything else you need. You boys should get some sleep soon, too.”

“I’ll go get that comforter,” says his dad, turning to go.

“Wait,” calls Patrice, untangling himself the rest of the way from Geno and getting stiffly to his feet. “Hang on, I’ll help you grab some extra pillows, too.”

He manages to make it as far as the hall before wrapping arms around his mother, hanging on and breathing against her hair as he tries not to sniffle too loudly.

“Oh,” she breathes quietly, squeezing her arms around him and leaning up to kiss his temple. “Patrice.”

He breaks away after a moment, forcing himself to step back but then hugging his dad just as tightly. “Thank you,” he murmurs, and his dad nods, ruffling his hair.

“Go back in there,” he tells Patrice gently. “We’ll get the bedding. And Patrice...” He trails off, hesitating.

“Same rules apply with Geno sleeping here,” Patrice’s mother says, succinctly. “No closed doors, and no, well. You know.”

Patrice nods and shuffles back into the den, where Geno’s already got on one of the ratty old henleys, hanging loose and threadbare over his jeans. He only hesitates a second before striding over, cupping a palm against Geno’s cheek and rising up on tiptoe to press a kiss to his mouth.

They turn the TV on low after Patrice’s dad returns with the bedding, Geno constructing a nest for himself on the couch and holding open the corner of the blanket for Patrice to join him. The last thing
he sees before drifting off is Geno’s eyes still open, trained at the television, glassily reflecting the flickering bluish glow of a *Battlestar Galactica* rerun.
June: Johnny

Johnny waits at Avec for forty minutes, dicking around on his phone at the bar, before he finally texts Looch.

*Where the fuck are you?*

He watches the screen until it goes black, sipping his diet Coke and fidgeting on the stool. A couple of minutes later, it vibrates on the bar next to him.

*Parents being psychos, won’t let me leave. SO SO SORRY!!!*

Johnny snorts, typing, *maybe tell me next time, before I show up and wait around forever.*

*SORRY!!!* comes back a moment later, doing nothing to abate Johnny’s irritation. It’s quickly followed by, *srsl, sosorry. Call u tmrw.*

Johnny finishes his Coke and slides off the stool. He glances back at the dance floor, but doesn’t see anyone he knows. So much for a post-finals celebration. He’s halfway to the door when a shout stops him in his tracks, turning to scan the darkened room and seeing Carey Price waving from a cluster of low tables.

He seems to be alone, which is a first, and Johnny looks dubiously at the chair Price pushes out for him with the toe of his boot, before sitting down.

“Congrats on your win,” Price says, in greeting. He grins, and his teeth flash blueish in the glow lighting the dance floor.

“Congrats on your MVP trophy,” Johnny counters, and Price’s smile widens.

“I do what I can.”

Johnny laughs. “Maybe if your defense felt the same way, you wouldn’t have to work as hard.”

“Shut up,” says Price, but he laughs as Johnny holds his hands up in apologetic surrender. “Dude, it’s cool. Hey, you here with anyone?”

“I was supposed to be meeting—” A vivid flashback of the last time Looch and Price were both here at the same time hits Johnny with unpleasant force, and he backpedals quickly. “—a friend,” he finishes, instead. “But he bailed. I was just headed home.”

“Oh,” says Price. He watches Johnny for a moment, fiddling idly with the straw in his empty glass. “Wanna hang out for a bit?”

“We are hanging out,” says Johnny, flatly.

“Jesus. Who spat in your cornflakes?” Price asks. “You’re kind of a diva about being stood up, huh?”

“Shut up,” Johnny grumbles, rolling his eyes. “I am not. I’m just tired.”

“Okay,” says Price. He looks at Johnny again; it’s a look that has Johnny feeling suddenly like he’s sitting here in his underwear. He resists the urge to wrap arms around himself protectively, running a hand through his hair, instead. Price watches him do it. He says, “Wanna go hang out in my truck, or
“You’re not as slick as you think you are, you know that?” Johnny says, but he stands, and so does Price.

Price leads them out through the gravel parking lot, halfway down the darkened block to where a Jeep Rubicon is parked curbside. He holds the back door open for Johnny, and slides in after him. After the club, the silence of the Jeep interior makes Johnny’s ears ring.

That is, until Price asks, “So, you’re not a virgin, right?”

Johnny chokes on his laugh. “Uh, excuse me?”

“You’re not, right?” Price persists, even as Johnny’s incredulous laughter overcomes him and he collapses back against the leather seat behind him. “I just wanted to ask, because you’ve always seemed kinda…”

“Virginal?” Johnny finishes for him, still giggling. “Are you messing with me right now?”

“Like you don’t really have a lot of fun,” Price amends, and now it’s his turn to seem kind of annoyed. Even with his eyes narrowed and his mouth pinched in a frown he looks haughty and composed; like how the television network version of what a teenage boy is supposed to look, all high cheekbones and tanned skin. Johnny wonders if he practices getting his bangs to fall like that, just-so over one eye to emphasize that challenging look he’s wearing.

“I have fun,” says Johnny, when he finally remembers to reply. “Why would you-- I mean. I have a lot of fun.”


When they break apart, Johnny says, “I bet you get everything you want.”

Price laughs. “Didn’t get the championship win, did I? Didn’t even make it to the fucking final.”

“No,” Johnny says. “No, that’s true.”

Price knocks him back onto the seat, and kisses him again. He’s a good kisser. He takes over with practiced efficiency, and Johnny lets him.

Johnny just thinks fuck it and gets his hands wedged in Price’s back pockets, hauling him ungracefully until he’s straddling Johnny’s lap. Price grins.

“What are you into?” He asks.

Guys with way too much baggage., Johnny thinks, but he says, “Head.” Because that’s also true.

“Cool.” Price has hands on his fly before Johnny even registers. “You want a couple fingers with it?” His mouth is right on Johnny’s ear, tonguing up the curve and making it really fucking hard to concentrate.

“I um. I mean.” He’s not sure what he means.

“Just let me know if you decide.” Price grins, and folds himself down in the tight space in front of the truck’s bench seat between Johnny’s legs, tugging Johnny’s pants with him.

It turns out that goaltending isn’t Price’s only talent. He does a thing with the flat of his tongue where
he just worries at the slit in Johnny’s dick until Johnny’s thighs are trembling and he’s slumped low in his seat, before he just swallows him down.

“Holy fuck,” Johnny says, and Price looks up at him, the self-satisfied smile obvious in his eyes. He does the thing with his tongue again and Johnny fists a hand in his hair, panting a litany of yeah, yeah, fuck yeah’s until they don’t even sound like words anymore. “I’m-- I’m gonna--”

Price pulls off, switching to his hand on Johnny’s dick and jerking him off hard and quick until he’s coming messily between Price’s fingers.

“Shit, that was really hot.” And it’s satisfying to hear the genuine appreciation in Price’s voice, even if Johnny’s not sure how getting an almost-stranger’s jizz all over your hand in a truck cab is a huge turn-on, specifically.

“Yeah?” He grins, shimmying his pants back up and fucking with the zipper until things are all back where they should be.

“Fuck yeah,” Price nods, wiping his hand off on a crumpled up napkin from the floor and climbing back up onto the bench seat next to Johnny.

Johnny doesn’t have the slightest idea how to respond, so he says, “So uh, what are you into? Sorry, I guess. I mean. I should’ve asked before, shouldn’t I?”

“So earnest,” Price laughs. “This is why people get the wrong idea about you.”

“The wrong idea,” Johnny echoes. “You mean, that I’m a virgin? I think that was just you, man. Not people.”

“So sue me if I’m wrong once in awhile,” Price says, rolling his eyes and pouting in a way that draws undeniable attention to the redness of his mouth. “You always seem kind of, like, I dunno. Really focused, and whatever.”

“I’m eighteen,” Johnny says. “I can be really focused and still have sex.”

Price looks at him appraisingly, and he’s silent for a long moment. Finally, he says, “You’re way out of that Kane kid’s league, you know that, right?”

Johnny says, “What?”

“My boy PK’s grandma lives on his street, so we’ve all hung out a couple times when we were over there visiting.”

“Oh,” says Johnny. “Why the fuck are we talking about this, again?”

“Hey,” says Price, and when Johnny glances up at him there’s an openness there that wasn’t a minute before. “I’m just saying, you’re hot shit. Own it.”

Johnny snorts. “You want me to get you off, or you wanna sit around telling me how great I am all night?” he asks. “Because I’m good for either, but I’ve got shit to do tomorrow and I don’t want to stay out all night.”

“Captains,” Price sighs theatrically. “Here, just--”

He shifts his legs wider, working his own fly one-handed and shoving his jeans down enough so Johnny can get a hand on his dick. Price shifts until he’s sort of loosely assembled over Johnny, with
his mouth sucking lazily on Johnny’s neck.

The angle isn’t fantastic, Johnny’s wrist is cramped, but he likes the way Price’s hips ride it out in time with his hand; likes the hot breath at his throat and the way Price breathes pleasant little sighs every time Johnny rubs his thumb up around the head. Lazy fumbling eventually gives way to a focused rhythm. Price’s sighs turn into moans, shameless and desperate and wow, okay, maybe Johnny kind of sees what he meant by how hot this is.

It’s awkward and cramped and distressingly public for anyone tall enough who decides to wander by on the sidewalk, and something in the pit of Johnny’s belly gives a little thrill at the thought. He speeds his hand up, shifting their angle slightly, and just like that he’s got Price practically climbing him, kissing him sloppily, desperately on the mouth, and coming warm and wet in his hand. And probably on his shirt.

They make out until they’re just trading lazy kisses and Johnny finally thinks to ask, “Shit. What time do you think it is?’’

“Hang on,’’ Price mutters, sitting back and in one motion tugging up his jeans and retrieving his phone from a back pocket to check the time. “One forty-six.’’

“Shit,’’ says Johnny, sitting up and patting his pockets, making sure his phone, keys, and wallet are all still in the pockets of his jeans. “Well, uh. This was fun, but I gotta... ’’ He trails off awkwardly, fingers on the door handle.

“You’ve gotta go do big, important things tomorrow, I know.’’ Price grins. “It’s cool. See you around, probably.’’ He’s got just enough of a drawl that somehow the whole urban cowboy thing is working for him, and not just resounding like a bad porn cliché. “‘Night.’’

“‘Night. Drive safe.’’ Johnny slides out of the cab and Price gives him a nod that looks like it should be wearing a Stetson. A moment later, the truck roars to life and rolls off down the darkened street.

Johnny stands a moment on the curb, delaying his return to the lights and noise of the club. Finally, he smooths his hair back and checks his fly, skirting past a cluster of kids passing a joint around at the edge of the parking lot as he tries to remember where the hell he left his truck.

He doesn’t notice the kid standing alone in the shadow of big, old SUV until a voice calls, “Yo, dude, you got a light?’’

Johnny jumps, tripping a step as a pale face framed with a hoodie and a mess of dark hair takes a step toward him, hopefully holding out an unlit cigarette. A pale, vaguely familiar face.

“No, I don’t, sorry,’’ he says, just as the headlight beams from a leaving car illuminates their little corner of the parking lot, flooding both of them with a harsh halogen glow. Johnny stares. “Seguin?’’

“Uh,’’ says the kid, taking a step back and reaching up to tug self-consciously at his hood. The headlight beams sweep away and disappear as the car pulls into the street, but Johnny can still see the whites of wide, panicked eyes.

“Is Bergy here?’’ Johnny asks, glancing around. “I haven’t heard from him all week. Are you here with him and Malkin?’’

Even as he asks, it seems strange. Patrice had griped about Seguin’s shitty attitude about him and Malkin for weeks at Saturday morning soccer camp. Then again, the alternatives are even weirder.

“Uh,’’ says Seguin, again. “Um, no, I, uh.” He glances around, as if looking for an escape route, but
he’s bracketed in by two cars, and the wall behind him. “Looch told me you guys were going to a movie tonight.”

“We were,” Johnny says, rolling his eyes and glaring at nothing in particular. “But then he couldn’t make any of the early showings, and the late ones were too late, so we decided to just come here, and then he fucking bailed like an asshole at the last second.”

“Oh,” says Seguin.

“Yeah,” says Johnny.

They stand for a long, long minute, staring at each other. Seguin is tall. Johnny doesn’t know how he never noticed that before.

“So, then,” he says at last, when he’s maxed out on the awkward staring thing, “why are you here?”

Seguin glares. “Fuck off. Why are you here?”

“Because this is a gay club and it’s teen night, and I’m gay and eighteen,” Johnny says, raising his eyebrows and daring Seguin to pull some predictable bullshit. Almost wishing he would. “What’s your excuse?”

Seguin’s eyes dart away. Even in the dim light, Johnny can see him fidget; the way his hands move restlessly at his sides. “I dunno,” he says, finally. “Curious, I guess?”

Johnny snorts. “Curious?”

“Yeah,” Seguin says, louder this time, and this time his eyes meet Johnny’s, jaw set and chin jutted out defiantly like a scared, angry little kid. “Maybe I am. So what?”

“Curious,” Johnny says again. “Like, seriously curious about…” He trails off uncertainly, finally lamely finishing, “About gay stuff?”

Seguin snorts, and then ducks his head quickly, like he’s embarrassed. It’s bizarre. Johnny’s never seen Seguin anything but swaggering and shameless.

“I fucking swear, if you’re bullshitting me—” he starts, but Seguin cuts him off.

“Yeah, okay?” He blurts. “I’m— I don’t know. It’s complicated, and I don’t want to talk about it. Not with you, anyway.” He glares at Johnny, arms crossed tight over his chest. “I kept trying to talk to Patrice, but…”

He trails off, and Johnny finishes, “He’s been kinda preoccupied lately, yeah.”

“Yeah,” says Seguin. “I was supposed to be staying at his house this week, but then he made some lame excuse at the last second.”

Johnny has no idea what to say to this, besides how maybe Patrice didn’t feel up to a week’s worth of hostility between his best friend and boyfriend. He says, “Huh,” instead.

Seguin shrugs, looking anywhere but at Johnny’s face.

“So then, you’re…”

“I don’t know,” Seguin says, quickly. Defensively. He hugs his arms even tighter around himself, and slumps back against the brick wall behind him. “I dunno. I told you, I was just curious.”
“Curious about what?” Johnny asks, again, gentler this time. The hairs on the back of his neck are prickling, and something twists sympathetically in his chest; something painfully familiar.

Seguin looks back up, and this time, his eyes are blazing. “None of your business,” he says, sharply, and all the vulnerability is gone from his expression, as quickly as it’d come. “I told you, I don’t want to talk about this with you.”

“Fine,” Johnny says, taking a step back and shoving his hands into his pockets. “You do you, dude, I don’t give a damn. Just, maybe lay off the closeted douchebag stereotype shit around your friends who, you know, aren’t so insecure that they feel like they have to sneak around and lie to everyone.”

“Fuck you,” Seguin says, but Johnny can hear the tremor in his voice. “Fuck you and your high fucking horse, Toews.”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Whatever, I’m going home.”

He turns and stalks off down the gravel row. Behind him, Seguin yells, ”You better not say a fucking thing about this!”

Johnny pauses, turning back to look at him. “Dude, I don’t even know what this was,” he says, honestly. “And whatever’s going on with you is none of my fucking business, anyway.”

“Good,” says Seguin, still glaring. “Damn right, it’s not.”

“Yeah,” Johnny agrees. “Okay. But I am going to tell Patrice that you smoke.”

He doesn’t give Seguin time to come up with a response to that, turning quickly again and beelining for his truck.
June: Geno

Geno wakes up stiff and chilled and with a thick knot of anxiety already tightening around the edges of his consciousness.

He reaches around for his phone on the side table next to the couch and shuts off the alarm, sitting up and looking around blearily. His blankets have all slipped off onto the floor, which explains the chill, and the reason for the anxiety comes flooding back.

Shit.

There’s a rustle across the room and he looks up to see Patrice curled up in the recliner in front of the TV. He must have moved over there some time in the night, but Geno doesn’t remember. What he does remember is his dad’s face, the disappointment and anger, and his mother’s pinched, stony silence.

Patrice mumbles, “‘Morning,” and when Geno glances up, Patrice’s eyes are trained on him.

“Hey,” Geno says, and tries to relax his face, for all the good it does.

“I’m gonna skip my shift at the tutoring lab today,” Patrice says, sitting up and stretching. His back cracks loudly and Geno can hear it even on the other side of the room. “You’re done around three, right?”

Geno nods. “Yeah,” he says, and then yet another miserable thought occurs to him. “No car. Took bus here yesterday, don’t have car, don’t have way to get to school, get back--”

He can hear his words tripping over themselves, barely intelligible in the re-mounting panic, and his breath tight in his chest. There’s a weight next to him on the couch and then Patrice’s arms are back around him, Patrice’s cold nose pressed into the bare skin of his throat, murmuring, “Okay, it’s okay, it’s gonna be alright.”

“Not okay,” Geno says, and his voice is still high and tight, his whole body shaking in Patrice’s grip. “None of this okay.”

“No,” Patrice agrees quietly. He sounds nervous, and Geno only feels worse for snapping. “No, you’re right. But I can drive you, it’ll be fine. Consol’s not too far out of my way, we’ll just have to leave a little early, and you might need to wait like, half an hour for a pickup after school.”

Geno heaves a shaky sigh, but after a moment he nods. “Okay,” he says. “But I helping with gas, then.”

Patrice sighs, and some of the tension sags from his shoulders. “Sure, if you want. We can figure all that out later. We’ve got to get moving if I’m gonna drive you this morning, though. You want some breakfast?”

Geno doesn’t actually think he’ll ever be hungry again, but he follows Patrice into the kitchen, their fingers still tangled together. He breaks off little bits from the Pop-Tart Patrice toasts for him, even though it mostly just tastes like sand on his tongue. Patrice doesn’t look like he’s doing much better with his.

Gerard and Sylvie come down after a few minutes of Geno and Patrice standing together in silence, leaned back against the counter. They both smile their good mornings and Sylvie asks, “Geno, is
Patrice taking you to school?”

“Mmhm,” Geno intones. He’s having a hard time meeting her eyes and seeing the sympathy there.

“Good,” she says. “I can pick you up this afternoon, if your classes get out around the same time Patrice’s do. I pass through on my way home from work and that way you won’t have to wait.”

Geno glances over at Patrice, who gives him a tentative little smile and shrug. “Yes,” he tells her. “That would be very nice of you.”

In truth, the last thing he wants is to be alone in a car with someone else’s parent -- even Patrice’s. Possibly especially Patrice’s, since apparently people being kind to him right now has embarrassing results. He wipes his face with the back of his hand and tries to make it look like he’s covering a yawn.

Patrice shepherds him out to the car a minute later, calling goodbye to his parents and both of them collecting their bags on the way out the door. The ride to school is quiet, but Patrice reaches over at stoplights to squeeze Geno’s fingers in his, pulling him out of the whirlwind of panicked thoughts all jockeying for his attention.

He’s going to have to tell the guys…something. Or, some of the guys; the ones who’ll start to notice something’s off.

Work. He can’t even go to work. He’s been helping out in his mother’s restaurant since he could stand upright and hold things at the same time, he’s good at it, he loves it there, with the smells and the kitchen clatter and the bitchy patrons he and Denis spend their breaks making fun of. He blinks hard and stares intently out the window, counting cars and houses and fire hydrants until he has control of his face again.

In the Consol parking lot, Patrice kisses him goodbye and doesn’t let go of his hand for a long time.

“Text me if you need anything, okay?”

Geno nods once, staring down at their entwined fingers.

“I’ll be home by the time you and Mom get back, and we can figure out more stuff then.”

“Yeah,” Geno says. When he glances up through the windshield, he can already see Sid standing and watching them, halfway up the steps of the main entrance. “Yeah, we figure out.”

Patrice kisses him again, quickly. “Alright, then. I love you, I’ll see you this afternoon.”

Geno just nods mutely and gets out of the car, collecting his bag from the back seat and giving Patrice a little wave as he pulls off into the stream of cars exiting the parking lot. He feels bad, knowing that Patrice is worried and anxious, too, but Geno doesn’t have the first idea of what to tell him.

“What’s up?” asks Sid, falling into step with him as Geno starts up the steps. “Was that Bergeron? Are his parents out of town or something, did you spend the night?”

The thing about Sid is that, coming from nearly anyone else, this would be gossiping. However, since this is Sid, the barrage of questioning is closer to a wary monotone, reserving his politely dubious raised eyebrows and pointed silences until he has all the facts. Usually it’s kind of endearing, but today it makes Geno want to hit him. Actually, Geno just wants to hit someone, he isn’t feeling terribly picky about who.
“Don’t start,” he snaps, and Sid’s eyes immediately narrow.

“I wasn’t going to start anything,” Sid says, with a quiet little huff as they take their seats in homeroom. “I stopped caring you were seeing a Causeway guy months ago.”

This catches Geno off his guard, and for a moment he just looks at Sid. Teammate approval and secret relationships all seem so, so long ago.

He snorts. “Know you don’t like,” Geno says, and yeah, he’s really itching for a fight, apparently. None of this is Sid’s fault, he forces himself to remember. Sid doesn’t even know what’s going on.

Driving this point home, Sid’s voice is actually hurt when he says, “That’s not true.” He pauses, then amends, “Well, only on the ice. I like him just fine outside of games.”

Ordinarily this would be Geno’s cue for a chirp, some jab about Sid just being bitter because Patrice’s faceoff percentages are better, or something. When he glances over, Sid is even looking at him like he’s ready for it, corners of his mouth twitched up and taunting, but Geno can’t seem to form the words. He just looks at Sid for a long, quiet breath before the PA clicks to life and the morning announcements crackle through the speaker over the whiteboard, putting an abrupt end to any further conversation.

Sid doesn’t press further, and if anyone else notices Geno acting weird after homeroom and through the rest of his classes, nobody says anything about it. It helps that Flower, Duper, and Neal spend all of lunch trying to build a model skyscraper out of crinkle-cut fries and toothpicks.

Geno sits quietly amid all the ruckus, pretending to do his history homework and listening to Sid’s increasingly exasperated huffs as Nealer steals his fries for the cause.

“Whatever,” Duper says airily. “It’s not like you’re gonna eat them, dude.”

“That’s not really the point,” Sid says, but doesn’t bother to say anything else when Neal grabs the last few for makeshift antennae. He just munches his apple and looks smug when the cafeteria monitor comes over to tell them off for making a scene.

It’s all deceptively familiar, and Geno finds himself lulled into the routine of it over and over. He lets it carry him through the day, pushing the ever-present sick worry to the back of his mind.

His phone goes off after last period, as he and Sid are making their way out the main front doors with the wave of students, and he doesn’t think as he digs it out and answers without bothering to glance at the screen.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Evgeni. Do you have a moment?”

A chill washes through him, chased by fresh twinges of last night’s rage and misery, and the brittle shell of composure he’s been trying to piece together all day feels that much weaker.

Switching to Russian, he says, “Hi, Dad. I’m kind of busy, can it wait?”

Geno’s never spoken to his father this way before, in this clipped, impersonal tone that seems to come so naturally in the wake of the past twenty-four hours.

His father seems nearly as surprised as he feels himself when he says, “Oh, um. Alright. I was just wondering,” he hesitates, sounding distinctly nervous under the familiar sturdy cadence, “could you
come home tonight? I don’t want to fight,” he adds quickly, when Geno makes an angry, unbidden noise in his throat. “I don’t. I just want to talk with you. Just the two of us. Maybe resolve this before it gets worse?”

He sounds sad. Sad and upset in a way Geno’s never heard; in a way that unseats him and makes his stomach coil with the newness of it.

Geno takes a long breath. He stares down at his shoes on the pavement, avoiding Sid’s quietly questioning gaze.

He says, “Okay,” and can actually hear the sigh of relief on his dad’s end. “Can you pick me up?”

“Now?”

“Yeah.”

“Evgeni, I just wanted to make sure. I haven’t picked you up from school since you were a freshman.” His dad’s voice is beginning to take an edge to it, and a deep down angry little part of Geno thinks, good.

“I know,” he says coldly, and then, “I’ll see you soon. I have to go.”

Sid says, “Everything okay?” tentatively, and Geno just shrugs.

“Family stuff,” he says by way of explanation, which does little to change Sid’s look of polite concern. “Nothing worry about.”

He’s been waiting for years for English to feel less clunky in his mouth after switching back from Russian, but it never seems to get any smoother, even just composing a text to Patrice.

Can pls tell your mom i not need ride. Dad call, say want to talk, he pick me up frm school.

Patrice texts back, Ok. Everything alright? What happened? and Geno is halfway through trying to compose a coherent reply when his dad pulls up.

“Hi,” his dad says, as they pull off the curb, Sid waving a dubious goodbye. “You hungry? I thought we could get something to eat while we talk.”

Geno shakes his head. “I’m not really hungry, no. Can we just go home?”

His dad looks at him for a long moment before nodding once, flicking on the turn signal and pointing them towards home. It’s weird, he’s only been gone for a night, but just the thought of his own bedroom makes him ache a little.

“I thought you were always hungry after school,” his dad says, clearly trying for casual and missing by a mile when he can only seem to stare straight over the steering wheel as he talks.

“Not today.” Geno says truthfully, but then when his dad’s expression gets even more tense he adds quietly, “but thanks.”

They drive in silence the rest of the way home as if by some mutual stalemate, and when they get in, his dad puts the kettle on for tea before gesturing Geno toward the table.

“Have a seat,” he says.

Geno feels about six years old as he pulls out a chair and sits, fidgeting with the string in his hoodie
like a naughty kid preparing for a lecture.

Only, he isn’t a naughty kid; a thought that keeps occurring to him in short bursts of realization every time his warring guilt starts to topple the mounting rage and betrayal he’s starting to cling to like a standard. He glares down at his hands and avoids his father’s eyes and tries to remember this.

His dad joins him, setting out two mugs and sitting across the table from Geno as the kettle heats. He says, “I’m sorry about last night.”

Geno is so surprised that he looks up, meeting his dad’s gaze head on. He says, “Sorry for what you said?”

It’s his dad’s turn to look away, mouth going thin. “I shouldn’t have shouted,” he says, without answering the question. The skin on the back of Geno’s neck prickles. “Evgeni, I hope you know, I never wanted to make you leave.”

Geno snorts incredulously. “You told me to break up with Patrice or get out of your house,” he says. “You told me I’m confused and I don’t know what I’m doing and how disappointed you were. What else was I supposed to do?”

“Not healthy?” Geno says, voice rising with his temper as all of yesterday’s rage floods back through him even more vicious and hot than before. “We love each other! What’s more healthy than that? He’s good for me, Dad. Even his parents—”

“All right,” his dad cuts in, and he’s lost most of the patient, sad tone from moments before, sounding almost as angry now as Geno feels. “What do they think?”

“They’re fine with it,” Geno spits back, glaring. “They like me. They like that I care about their son, and that I make him happy.”

His father makes a noise of mixed distaste and disbelief, something Geno’s grown to associate with politicians and telemarketers who call during dinner. He takes a breath, though, seeming to try and center himself before saying, “Please, Evgeni. Please try and see why I’m concerned. I love you, I only want what’s best. Please just come home and we can sort this all out.”

“Not if it means breaking up with Patrice,” Geno says, grateful that his voice only shakes a little. “Not if all you’re going to do is try to fix me.”

“Actually,” says his father carefully, “I spoke with a colleague at the airlines. He works back in St. Petersburg at the head office, and his wife teaches at a boarding school with an excellent hockey program. I was thinking—”

“In what way does shipping me off to boarding school in Russia equate to my coming home,” Geno interrupts loudly. Across the room the teakettle is starting to whistle, and he gets up to turn off the stove, shoving his chair so hard that it falls back onto the floor with a clatter. He doesn’t bother to pour water into the mugs, but just stays standing, arms crossed and glaring at his dad.

“Evgeni, please sit down,” his dad says, clearly trying to keep his voice in check. “Please. I just wanted to talk.”

“I don’t want to sit,” Geno snaps. “We are talking. You just want to talk about something that isn’t
“What about what we talked about when you started going to Consol?” asks his dad. “About playing professionally for Russia. Is that not something you think about anymore?”

It’s a low blow, a dirty move and they both know it. “That was a long time ago,” he says quietly. “I have different priorities now.”

His father’s frown deepens. “You would really give up those ambitions for this boy?” he asks, and the way he says it, Geno can tell this was the answer he was expecting, the point he’d been trying to make.

“No,” Geno says, exasperated. “No! I wouldn’t. Not just for him. I like my life here, Dad. I like my team and my friends, and Patrice,” he adds pointedly. “I want to go to college in the states. I’m happy here. I thought you might be happy for me.” He pauses for breath, steeling himself before adding, “And even if you’re not, I’m eighteen. You can’t stop me.”

The words, the disrespect, sound alien spoken in Geno’s voice, and he feels just as surprised as his father looks, stunned speechless. He sits quietly as the seconds stretch on agonizingly, eyes on Geno’s face before letting out a long sigh.

“Of course I’m happy that you’re happy,” he says, finally. “Of course. You do well in school and you’re an excellent player and captain. I’ve seen how much your teammates respect you. But this is why I don’t understand how you could suddenly start making such irresponsible choices. Your mother said Denis has been taking your Saturday shifts at the restaurant for months now, and I can only assume why.”

“We traded,” Geno says coolly. “I took his Thursdays and he took my Saturdays. He’s fine with it. Has he ever complained to you?”

“No,” his father concedes. “But--”

“But you’re looking for problems where there aren’t any. I’m not breaking up with Patrice, Dad. This isn’t even an argument.”

Geno doesn’t think he’s ever seen his dad look this tired. Not even after weeks of back and forth commutes to the airlines’ main office in Russia. “You’re still my son, at any age,” he says, evenly. “And I’m sorry, but I just can’t allow it to continue.”

“Then I’m sorry, too,” Geno says, and he really, really is. He has to struggle to keep his voice steady as he says, “I’ll get the rest of my things when I find somewhere else to live.”

And that’s it. He knows the moment he’s said it how serious he really is, and his dad seems to read it in Geno’s expression, color draining from his face.

“You’d choose him over your family?”

For a bright, stinging second, Geno wants nothing more than to hit his father. His fists ball at his sides and his breath tightens in his throat, but he shakes his head. “No,” he says, measuring his tone carefully. “I’m choosing to leave so I don’t have to lie to you, or myself. You are the one choosing your stupid, outdated beliefs over me.”

Geno might as well have actually hit him. His dad just stares, wide-eyed and angry and getting to his feet as his face turns from pale to a patchy red. Sure, maybe that was a little petty, but whatever. As far as Geno’s concerned, he’s already being way too mature about this. He’s trembling and trying to
hide it as he starts for the front door.

“How dare you,” his father calls, starting after him. “How can you disrespect me like that?”

Geno just walks faster, collecting his backpack from the front hall, refusing to look back over his shoulder as his dad catches up. “You’re one to fucking talk,” he snarls, and then tenses, nearly convinced for a moment that his father might actually strike him.

He doesn’t, though. When Geno makes it out to the porch, storming down the steps and turning to look, his dad is just standing stock still in the doorway. More than anything, he just looks sad, and it’s somehow so much worse than anything else.

Suddenly, Geno’s feet feel like lead, his throat like it’s full of thick cotton. He says quietly, “Sorry, Dad,” and forces himself to turn and walk before he can change his mind.

Behind him, his dad doesn’t say anything, and when Geno glances back again, the door is closed and his dad is gone and it’s the loneliest he’s ever felt in his life.
June: Patrice

Patrice relays Geno’s message to his mom and texts Geno back, staring at his phone waiting for a reply.

“Bergeron!”

Patrice startles where he’s hovering outside the library doors, looking up to see Segs. His heart sinks. “Oh my god, dude, I completely forgot we were going to study today. Shit, I am so sorry.”

“Big surprise, there,” Segs snorts, and Patrice feels a renewed surge of guilt, alongside the anger and frustration.

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

Segs rolls his eyes. “It means I’m getting kinda used to you blowing me off. I told you weeks ago I needed to stay with you this week, and you cancel at the last second with some ’something came up’ bullshit excuse. We keep inviting you out, or asking you to do stuff with us, but you always say no. Ever since--”

“I’ve told you no, like, twice,” Patrice snaps, glaring. “And I told you, I’m sorry about not letting you stay over this week, but it’s really complicated. You’re acting like a jealous asshole.”

Segs flinches, and Patrice immediately wishes he could take the words back. “Man, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean--”

“Yeah, you did,” Segs says, over him. Patrice knows him well enough to read past the angry scowl and see how hurt Segs is. “But hey, at least now you’re being honest.”

A part of Patrice wishes he could actually tell his friends what’s going on with Geno, but he can’t get past feeling like it’s not his to tell.

“This isn’t,” he starts, and then falters. “I mean. I don’t know what you think, Ty, but sometimes shit just isn’t about you, you know?”

“Yeah,” Segs snorts. “Sure, whatever. You’ve made that abundantly clear.”

“Tyler--”

“I need to go study,” Segs says, icily.

Patrice sighs. “I could still come with you. I’ve just gotta text my mom and tell her I’ll be later.”

“No,” Segs says, pushing past Patrice toward the library doors. “I need to concentrate, and I think I can do that better without you around.”

Patrice watches him disappear through the double doors without a backward glance, heartbeat hammering in his ears. Sure, he’s turned down a couple of invitations lately, but it’s not like he never sees his friends, anymore. It’s not like he’s one of those assholes who gets a relationship and suddenly disappears. Or, okay, no. Maybe he kind of is, but at least he has an excuse. It’s not like him and Geno are dealing with the same trivial crap most high school couples do. And anyway, Segs has been biased against Geno since the beginning. He’s always been a brat about sharing. When he was six, he broke his own Tonka truck just so his mom couldn’t make him share it.
Another surge of guilt overwhelms him, as Patrice thinks about six year old Segs. He’d been the least shy kid at mini-mites hockey camp, and Patrice had been the most, so the coach had paired them together. Things had been so much simpler, back when the biggest thing he had to worry about was getting teased for showing up in the wrong color jersey.

He makes his way over to his car on the far side of the student parking lot, still stewing. The anger and frustration and guilt stirred up by the conversation with Segs had managed to momentarily distract him, but as he slides into the driver’s seat, another pang of anxiety overtakes him.

He checks his phone again, just in case, but there’s nothing from Geno. It’s only been a little while, he reminds himself. He just got out of school, too, and he didn’t indicate any idea of when exactly he and his dad were going to talk.

Geno still hasn’t texted when Patrice gets home. A part of him really wishes he had stayed at the library to study, regardless of what Segs had said. Or that he’d scheduled some last-minute tutoring sessions, just to keep himself distracted.

His mom is in the kitchen when he goes inside, getting something ready for the oven in a big cast iron pot, and Patrice gratefully joins her, washing the pile of potatoes next to the sink.

“Hi,” his mom says, dropping a kiss on his cheek and giving him a quick squeeze around the shoulders in passing. “Look at you, home so early! Is Geno joining us for dinner? This recipe makes enough for an army.”

Patrice sighs. “I dunno,” he says, starting in on the potatoes with the vegetable peeler she hands him. “I haven’t heard from him since he texted me to text you.”

His mom says, “Oh.” And then, upon seeing his face, “Oh, sweetheart, come here.”

She hugs him tight and he hangs on, still holding the vegetable peeler and feeling like a dumb, scared little kid. He says, “He went to go talk to his dad. What if-- What if he decides to go back home? His parents told him that if he wanted to stay there, he’d have to break up with me.”

His mom gives him another little squeeze before pulling back to look up into his face. “Patrice,” she says gently. “They’re his family. Either way, it won’t be an easy decision.”

Patrice stiffens, dropping her gaze. “I know,” he says, and he hates the part of himself that hopes. “I know he’s close with them, but they don’t understand him! They don’t, or they wouldn’t be pulling this bullshit making him decide. Sorry,” he adds as an afterthought. His mom just shrugs.

“It isn’t fair, is it?” she says, simply.

“It’s freaking stupid,” Patrice snorts angrily, and returns to his potato peeling with probably way more force than necessary. The anger welling up in him is itchy and hot under his skin, but still better than the all-consuming despair, so he clings to it.

His mother hums her agreement, heating the pot on the stove and patting some cubes of beef dry with a paper towel. “I’ll admit, I don’t like it either,” she concedes after a moment, and Patrice has a sudden overwhelming surge of affection for her.

“I just...” He trails off quietly, shrugging. “I don’t know what I’ll do if he, you know. Decides he doesn’t want to be with me.”

He hears his mother’s sigh even over the sizzle of meat searing in the pan, and chances a glance up. She smiles sadly at him. “For what it’s worth, I don’t think it would be a question of him not wanting
“You have to say that,” Patrice grumbles mutinously down at the potatoes he’s begun cubing into chunks. “You’re my mom.”

She rolls her eyes, turning back to the stove. “Yes,” she agrees mildly, “but even if I wasn’t, I’d still see how he is with you. He really cares for you, Patrice, and I hope you remember that, no matter what he decides to do.”

Objectively, Patrice knows she has a point. He’s been beyond doubting Geno’s feelings for him for some time now, but right now that isn’t doing much to alleviate the sick, pervasive worry; the nagging thoughts of what it might be like if they do break up, what his life would feel like now that he’s gotten so comfortable having Geno as a constant.

“It’s just not fair!” he bursts out finally, knocking the cutting board so vegetable chunks scatter across the floor.

“I know,” says his mom. She bends and helps him collect them, rinsing them off before dumping everything into the pot. “It’s not.”

His dad comes home about an hour later, by which time Patrice has retreated into the living room with some homework and a Criminal Minds marathon on for background noise. He can hear his parents’ low voices from down the hall, every now and then a word or two of French filtering through his distracted consciousness when the TV noise lulls.

“Hey,” says his dad’s voice a minute or two later, and Patrice glances up from a physics revision worksheet to see him standing in the doorway. “How was school?”

Patrice shrugs. “Eh. Not the greatest.”

“Almost done, though, huh?”

“Yeah.” Patrice pushes aside his book, fiddling idly with his pencil. “Finals are next week.”

“You worried?” His dad asks, and Patrice shakes his head. “Good. You always do well, in the end.”

His dad settles into the recliner, turning the volume up a couple notches and watching in comfortable silence. It’s nice just to have the extra presence in the room, pulling Patrice back out of his head a little and forcing him to stop glancing at his phone every minute even though he knows the damn thing is turned up to full volume.

He’s nearly done with his physics by the time his mom calls for him to set the table a couple hours later.

“Any word?” she asks, and he shakes his head, collecting an armful of plates and silverware. “Alright, well I’ll just leave the cooker on low, and it’ll stay warm.”

Patrice doesn’t eat much during dinner, but his parents don’t push. They just talk about work, about his mom’s upcoming conference trip, about what Patrice thinks of the prospective JV guys trying to make varsity next year.

“I dunno,” he says, toying with a piece of carrot. “Caron and Smith get along great with the guys, but Coach said he wouldn’t make any decisions until after summer camps. I think he’s definitely keeping both Dougie and Torey on vars for D, though.”
“Wow,” says his dad. “They must be thrilled.”

“Yeah,” Patrice agrees. And then his phone goes off in his back pocket and Patrice nearly falls out of his chair in his hurry to reach it. Sure enough, it’s Geno’s contact picture on the caller ID.

“Um,” he says, glancing up nervously at his parents.

“Geno?” asks his mom, and he nods. “Well, answer it.”

His hands already feel all cold and shaky as he hits answer, saying “Hey,” in as measured a voice as he can manage. He pushes back from the table and heads down the hall out of earshot. “What’s up?”

“Can you pick me up?” Geno asks. “Please?” His voice sounds reedy and far away.

“Yeah,” Patrice says immediately, already grabbing his jacket off the peg by the door and fishing around for his keys in the pockets. “Yeah, of course. Where are you, what’s going on? Why are you whispering?”

Images of violent confrontations flit unbidden through Patrice’s mind, but Geno says, “Whispering because in library, not supposed to be on phone.”

“The one a couple blocks from your house?”

“Yeah,” Geno says. “But nearly closing, so have to leave. You can be here soon?”

“Shouldn’t be more than twenty five minutes,” Patrice promises, then calls down the hall, “Mom, Dad, Geno’s at the library by his house, I’m going to pick him up and we’ll be right back.”

“Okay,” his mom calls.

His dad adds, “Hang up before you drive.”

“Yeah, I know,” he yells back, shutting the door behind him. Outside the wind has picked up. To Geno he says, “So um. Is everything… How is everything?”

Geno makes a noncommittal noise that matches beat with the unsteady trip-hop of Patrice’s heart. “Is… Complicated,” he settles on. “Can explain better when seeing you.”

“Sure,” says Patrice. “Sure, sure, okay. Uh. I gotta hang up and drive now, but I’ll be there really soon, ‘kay?”


“Thanks. Love you.”

There’s no response, and when Patrice looks down at his phone, the call has already ended. His heart, which moments before had been trying to fight its way up his throat, plummets back down like a stone. Regardless, he turns the key in the ignition and pulls out of the driveway, forcing himself the just breathe, breathe, breathe. He’s never properly realized how fucking long this stupid drive between their neighborhoods is.

When he pulls up at a little after nine, Geno is standing on the curb outside.

“Hey,” Patrice says, as Geno gets into the car. He can’t bring himself to look away from his knuckles on the steering wheel.
“Hey,” Geno says. He sounds exhausted.

Silence stretches between them. Patrice says, “Um.”

“I can still stay with you?” Geno asks, quickly, words tumbling out in a single breath.

Patrice looks over at him abruptly, nearly missing the ramp for the highway. “What? I mean, yeah! Yeah, G. Of course.”

He hates himself for feeling glad. He knows what this means, how miserable Geno must be, but he can’t help the incandescent relief surging through him, thinking *me, me, he picked me,* even while he knows full well that nothing is as simple as that.

To distract himself, he reaches past the shifter, curling fingers around Geno’s hand where it’s resting on his leg, and gives it a little squeeze. Geno squeezes back, glancing over and giving Patrice the dull edge of his usual grin.

“Thanks,” he says, and Patrice gives his hand another squeeze.

“Uh,” Patrice says after a moment’s hesitation, “can I ask what happened?”

Geno’s silent for a long moment, so long that Patrice is halfway convinced he’s not going to reply, but finally he says, “Dad wanting to send me back, finish school in Russia.”

Patrice thinks he can actually feel his heart stop. “So then,” he tries, and his voice sounds choked, “are you--”

“No!” Geno bursts out, cutting him off. Even watching the road, Patrice can see the affronted look Geno’s giving him. “You crazy? No, not leaving.”

He sounds angry. Not with Patrice so much as the words themselves, spitting them out like a bitter taste on his tongue. “Fuck that,” he adds venomously. “Fuck him.”

“Your dad?” Patrice guesses, and Geno’s derisive snort is confirmation enough. “What did your mom say? Anything?”

“Wasn’t there,” Geno says shortly. “Dad say just father-son thing.”

“But you’re close with her!” Patrice protests, and now *he’s* affronted, even as Geno just sits there next to him, smoldering placidly. “Won’t she be pissed or upset that you’re actually leaving home like this? And what about Denis?”

Geno just shakes his head. “Don’t know about Denis, but told you, Mom was there other night. Only say she sad, she think I’m better than this.”

“Ugh,” says Patrice in disgust. “*Ugh.*” He glances up at the speedometer and instantly eases off the gas, taking a deep couple of breaths. “Well,” he says finally, glancing over, “I’m glad you’re not leaving.”

Geno’s hand twists where Patrice is still hanging onto it, lacing their fingers together. “Me too,” he says quietly, but the brittle, angry note stays firmly lodged in his tone. After a moment he adds, “You thinking I might?”

“Might what?” Patrice asks. “Leave? I mean no, I didn’t really consider you going back to Russia, but, um. I dunno, yeah, I was worried you might not want to, like. Stay. With me, I mean.”
“That what I meant,” Geno says, but his frown deepens.

“Well yeah,” Patrice shrugs. He pulls back into his parking spot in the driveway and stares at his hands on the steering wheel to keep from looking over at Geno. “Yeah, of course I was worried.”

Next to him, Geno hrrmphs. He unclips his seatbelt and leans over, catching Patrice’s mouth with his own. It’s barely a kiss, only lasts a second, but when he pulls back, there’s a fierceness in Geno’s face that wasn’t there before.

“Never that simple,” he says. “Never would just forget about everything, change mind just like that.” He snaps his fingers to demonstrate. “That why I went to library. Sat for long time, thought about everything. Make decision, then call you.”

It might just be the low light, just the hazy glow from the porch bulb filtering in through the windshield, but Geno suddenly looks older; tired and sad and older, and Patrice feels young and helpless and small when he asks, “So…what can I do?”

Geno tilts his head, thinking. “Not sure what I need,” he says, at length. “This good for now, though.”

Before Patrice really realizes what he’s doing, he’s clambered halfway over the center console between them and nearly into Geno’s lap, wrapping arms around him tightly and hanging on. “Okay,” he says through heaving breaths. “Okay, okay, good, because I really didn’t want to lose you.”

“Me, neither,” says Geno quietly against Patrice’s neck where his face is pressed. His fingers stroke soothingly through Patrice’s hair.

They stay like that for a few minutes, quiet and close while the car dampens the sound of the wind whooshing outside around them. Finally, Patrice says, “Wanna go inside?”


“Sure,” says Patrice, climbing from the car and taking Geno’s backpack for him before he can grab it. “I’ll show you how the washer works. Oh, and if you’re hungry, my mom made a ton of this beef stew stuff, and there’s bread and salad.”

He thinks Geno smiles a little, but it could be the dark playing tricks on his eyes. Either way, Geno says, “Okay, thanks. Should probably eat.”

“Yeah, me too,” Patrice says, suddenly realizing just how true this is, as he lets them both in the front door. “I didn’t really get a chance earlier. Here, just drop your bag in the laundry room and we’ll get food first.”

His parents are in the kitchen, finishing tidying up when Patrice comes in. Geno’s trailing a little behind him, and he hovers in the doorway as they both pause in what they’re doing and look up.

“Hey,” Patrice’s dad says, giving Geno one of his carefully concerned scrutinizing looks that Patrice is all too familiar with himself. “How’re you doing?”

Geno makes a noncommittal noise in his throat, but says, “Okay. Patrice-- I mean. Patrice say-- Uh. It really fine I stay here?”

“Yeah,” says Patrice’s mom, and his dad hums in agreement. “Of course. We use Patrice’s brother’s
room as an office now when he’s away at school, but the bed’s still in there and he won’t be back to visit until the fall, so you’re welcome to use it while he’s away.”

“Screw that,” mutters Patrice, where he’s rummaging in the cupboard for a couple bowls. “Just make him sleep on the couch when he’s back. He usually falls asleep down there anyway, playing Call of Duty all night.”

“Patrice,” says his mother admonishingly, but his dad makes a sound like a halfway-aborted snort of laughter.

“How about we just deal with that when we get there, alright?” he says.

“Sure.” Patrice shrugs agreeably, handing a bowl of stew and a spoon to Geno. “You want bread?”

Geno nods once and takes the chunk of garlic bread Patrice hands him. “Thanks.”

“Geno,” Patrice’s father says, tentatively. “You’re welcome here as long as you need, but as a parent myself, I have to ask. Do your parents at least know where you are? As a minor--”

“I’m not a minor,” Geno says, quietly. “Sorry, not mean to interrupt, but not minor. Turn eighteen last summer. Parents hold back a grade when we move from Russia.”

“Oh,” says Patrice’s dad, looking clearly wrong-footed with the whole situation. “Oh, um. Alright, then. But do they know you’re safe? God forbid, if Patrice ever, I mean,” he falters, looking from Patrice to Geno and back again. Patrice’s mother puts a hand on his arm and squeezes.

“We’d want to know he was safe,” she says, quietly. “Wherever he was.”

Geno sighs. “They know,” he says, somewhat begrudgingly. “I still have phone, anyway. They can call if they need to.”

“And you’ll actually pick up?” Patrice’s father fixes Geno with a scrutinizing gaze that Patrice is intimately familiar with.

Geno seems unperturbed. “I listen to voice mail, and maybe I call back.”

They stare at each other for a long moment, during which Patrice feels ready to crawl out of his skin. Finally, his father says, “Alright, then. Can’t ask more than that.”

“Thank you,” says Geno, politely.

“Just remember,” Patrice’s mom says, hitting the button to start the dishwasher and successfully breaking the tension, “same policy applies, like usual. We don’t mind if you’re hanging out together upstairs, but the doors have to stay open. Got it?”

Patrice wants to smack his head against the conveniently located fridge door for a moment, but he mumbles, “Yeah, Mom,” and takes a giant bite of food so he doesn’t have to say anything else. Next to him he can see Geno going bright red to the tips of his ears, but he nods, too.

“Great,” says Patrice’s dad, but even he looks a little relieved.

After they eat, Patrice helps Geno get his laundry started and the rest of his stuff situated in the spare room.

“Can go back later for other things,” Geno says quietly, looking over the small pile of clothes he’s stacked on top of the dresser. “Wait ‘til everybody out.”
“Yeah,” says Patrice, coming over to slip an arm around his waist, resting his chin on Geno’s shoulder. “Let me know when you want to go, I’ll drive you.”

Geno sniffs, tightening his hold on Patrice, but when Patrice looks up at his face, his eyes are dry.

“Lie down?” Geno asks, and when Patrice nods, he collapses gratefully onto the bed. Patrice follows, prodding his hip til Geno scoots over and makes room and curling up against his side.

“It’s gonna be okay,” Patrice tells him, just wanting to hear the words himself, but not really sure what they mean anymore now that he’s heard them out loud. Geno makes a noncommittal noise, but buries his nose in Patrice’s hair and lets out a slow sigh, some of the wire-taut tension seeping from him at last.

There’s nothing else Patrice can think to say or do; nothing that doesn’t seem trite or hollow or false. He lies there and stares up at the scattering of Guillaume’s old glow in the dark stars spread across the ceiling, and he wonders if this is what growing up is going to be like. Feeling so utterly lost and misguided and like an alien in his own skin, nothing familiar and everything spinning out, slipping just beyond his grasp until all he can do is hope.
Johnny stands and contemplates the heavy oak door in front of him.

He’s halfway convinced himself to just get back in his truck and leave when it’s flung open, warm light silhouetting the tall figure of Looch grinning down at him.

“Hi,” he says. “I was watching you stand here like a total freak from the living room window. C’mon in, already.”

“Are you sure I should be here?” Johnny asks, by way of greeting. “It’s Seguin’s house, right? I think that guy hates me.”

Looch snorts, holding the door open wider and staring pointedly until Johnny finally sighs, and steps inside.

“I don’t think he hates you. He’s just kind of a dick to most people,” Looch says, but Johnny’s not sure he’d sound so confident if he knew about their last meeting, outside Avec. “Everyone’s hanging out in the front room. You want something to drink?”

“Uh, sure, thanks,” Johnny says, following reluctantly along behind him.

Looch leads them down the carpeted hall to the back of the house; a big, open living room-dining room-kitchen area, where what looks like most of Causeway are gathered. The main crowd is grouped around a large TV in the far corner playing *Futurama*, but Johnny spots Patrice with Seguin and Marchand, playing cards at the dining table.

Seguin sees them first, glancing up and saying something Johnny doesn’t catch, but that earns him a shove from Patrice.

“You’re here!” Patrice says, practically bouncing out of his chair. There’s color high in his cheeks, and the table is littered with empties. “About damn time, too. Food’s on the counter, and there are drinks in the fridge.”

“We’re out of the good stuff!” Tyler calls loudly, looking completely unabashed when Looch gives him a threatening look.

“We’ll check, anyway,” Patrice says, rolling his eyes and towing Johnny over to the kitchen area. Behind them, Looch steals Patrice’s seat, still watching Seguin beadily. Seguin stares back.

“What, motherfucker,” he says. “You don’t scare me.”

Looch casually checks him off of his chair, sending Seguin sprawling to the floor while Marchy roars with laughter.

“Um.” Johnny frowns, watching the ensuing tussle that knocks over both Looch’s and Seguin chairs, and sends playing cards flying. “Are you sure you should’ve invited me?”

“Segs is just being Segs,” Patrice says, shrugging. “He’s all bitchy because he invited some chick to come out to this thing tonight, and she blew him off.”

He holds the fridge door open for Johnny, who rummages around until he finds the last Corona.
“How tragic for him.”

“Seriously,” says Patrice. “He just likes being the center of attention. If anything, he’ll appreciate you being here for the excuse to get totally dramatic about it.”

Johnny rolls his eyes, but he follows Patrice back to the table, where things between Looch and Seguin seem to have calmed down, and settles into the seat beside Looch. Seguin is attempting to stare him down across the table, and Johnny takes a swig of beer, pointedly ignoring him.

“So like,” Seguin says, loudly. He takes a long gulp of beer, while everyone watches expectantly. “Looch and Johnny. You guys are like, a thing, yeah?”

“Oh my god,” Patrice groans, at the same time Looch cracks up, and Johnny feels his cheeks go hot.

“We’re not, uh. I mean. We don’t,” Johnny flounders, no real idea what he’s even trying to say, but Looch cuts him off.

“We’re friends,” he says, and when Seguin snorts incredulously, he adds, “with benefits. Awesome, dirty benefits.”

He waggles his eyebrows suggestively and makes a kissy face at Johnny, who cracks up, shoving Looch’s face away.

“You are so not slick,” Johnny tells him.

Looch beams. “Whatever, you’re into it.”

He ducks over and lays a loud, wet, smacking kiss on Johnny’s cheek before Johnny can shove him off again.

“Awww,” coos Marchand.

“Barfff,” groans Seguin.

“Whatever, you totally instigated that shit,” Looch says. He slumps back in his seat and drops a heavy arm across the back of Johnny’s chair.

It’s warm and solid, and he doesn’t even do anything further to, like, actually touch Johnny or anything. Nothing like that. But it’s... nice. Nice to the point where Johnny almost wishes he wouldn’t, so he wouldn’t be tempted to lean back into it. Or to want Looch touching him. Maybe just fingertips around the curve of his shoulder; small and possessive, and sending a clear message. A clear message that doesn’t exist to send, so Johnny needs to stop thinking, drink his beer, and maybe just take the stupid cards Marchand is dealing him before he does something lame like lean into Looch’s warm, solid side.

They play a few rounds of blackjack, because it’s all any of them really know how to play. Johnny loses count of the rounds. Then he loses count of his drinks, and of the number of times Looch gropes his ass as he gets up for refills, and of Tyler’s subsequent vomiting noises.

Eventually, the other guys get up and wander over to the big TV, leaving Johnny and Looch playing an increasingly sloppy game of frustration.

“You keep cheating,” Johnny complains, and Looch kicks at his foot under the table.

“Whatever, so are you.”
Johnny flips over another couple of cards. He glances up at Looch, who makes a face at him.

“Oh, you were right, by the way,” Johnny says. “I meant to tell you last week, but you blew me off—”

“My parents were holding me hostage!”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Anyway, I meant to tell you, you were right. Pat cornered me at that party and tried to get back together.”

“Yeah?” Looch raises his eyebrows, seemingly forgetting about the cards in front of them. “And?”

“And nothing,” Johnny says, with a snort. “I told him no. No fucking way.”

“Good man,” says Looch, knocking their knees together under the table. “Gotta say, I’m a little surprised.”

“Seriously?” Johnny nearly chokes around the mouth of his beer bottle. “You thought— Why?”

Looch looks reluctant to say more, so Johnny kicks his chair leg, staring at him expectantly.

“Because,” Looch starts, slowly. “I don’t know. I heard what you said about him before, but also... I guess part of me figured you were really hung up on each other.”

“That’s fucking crazy,” Johnny says, more petulantly than he intends. He finishes his beer, toying with the paper label where it’s peeling back from the glass. “I mean, and I told him this, too, I think I really just miss what we were trying to be. When I think about it, looking back, it feels like we were trying to play house or some shit.”

“Yeah,” says Looch. He trails off, contemplatively. “There was probably a lot of pressure on you guys, huh?”

Johnny groans, burying his face in his arms, where they’re crossed on the table in front of him. “Dude, don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Looch asks, sounding genuinely perplexed. Or possibly just drunk. Johnny turns his head enough to look up at him, and finds Looch’s big, dark eyes gazing placidly back.

“Like you feel sorry for me,” Johnny grumbles, burying his face in his arms again, and aiming a kick at Looch’s foot again under the table.

Looch snorts. “Seriously? That’s what you think this is?” He aims a kick back. “You’re rocking enough self-pity right now for both of us. Get your shit together, man. I’ll grab us some more drinks.”

“‘Kay,” Johnny mumbles, trying not to sound too grateful for the excuse to change the subject.

He turns in his seat to watch the other guys, crowded around where they’ve started a Mario Kart tournament. Patrice is perched on the back of the sofa, chatting animatedly with Krejci, who has a curvy brunette chick in a sundress attached to his arm.

“How the fuck do you deal with it?” he asks Looch, when Looch gets back with a couple of fresh beers, thunking one down in front of Johnny so a little foams up and sloshes on his hand.

Looch takes a swig of his own beer, eyebrows going up in question. “Deal with what?”
“What you told me at the park, about when he kissed you,” Johnny says, jerking his head toward Davy. “You’re a lot cooler about it than me. I’d probably still be flipping out.”

“It was ages ago,” Looch says, shrugging. “Dude, I dunno. I don’t love it, but it’s also different. Dave and I don’t have, like, a real history, you know? Not like you and Kane. It’s super different. Also,” he takes another gulp of beer, shrugging, “when it really gets to me, I just get on the ice and take some fuckers out. That helps a lot.”

“Easy for you to say,” Johnny says, morosely. He drinks some beer, and then drinks some more, tipping his head back and enjoying the cold fizz down his throat.

“Oh please, you’re no delicate little shrinking violet out there,” says Looch, rolling his eyes. “Throw your weight around and tell me that doesn’t improve a shitty mood by at least fifty percent.”

“I’m supposed to be a good example and shit,” Johnny mutters. Looch just laughs and toasts their bottles together, because Looch is an unhelpful dickslap. “You’re an unhelpful dickslap,” Johnny informs him.

“So what you’re telling me,” Looch says, “is that you don’t wanna get laid tonight.”

“No, I totally do,” Johnny says. Because, no, he totally does. “But where? This isn’t even your house.”

“Nope,” Looch agrees. “It’s not. But Tyler is a little shit, who deserves everything that’s about to happen in his guest bedroom.”

“Oh,” says Johnny. “Okay.”

Looch narrows his eyes. “So...I’m not an unhelpful dickslap?”

“No.” Johnny shakes his head. The room wobbles a little on its axis. “You’re a very helpful dickslap.”

He leans in and kisses Looch right on his wide, laughing mouth. Messy and off-center.

“I wish shit could just stop being weird with him, you know?” Johnny says, out loud and without realizing, until Looch pulls back to look at him.

“Dude, seriously,” Looch says. “You can keep flipping out if you want, until you are the living embodiment of those country songs you love so much, and I will hang out and listen. Or you can let it go for a minute, and come have some sex. I’ll even let you top.”

Johnny drains his beer and gets up without another word.

“Yeah,” says Looch. “I fucking thought so.”

“Have you ever done this?” Johnny asks, once they’ve got a locked door between them and the muffled sounds of the party.

The guest room is small and dim, with a cozy little nightstand lamp next to the bed, which Looch flicks on before flopping back on the pillows.

“Been fucked?” he says. “Nah. I mean, I’ve fingered myself a little, but that was just weird, you know?”

“And you actually wanna?”
Looch half-sits back up, propping himself on an elbow to look at Johnny, still standing awkwardly at the foot of the bed.


Johnny nods, agreeing. He really agrees, actually. Actually, he probably prefers being fucked, most days, now that he thinks about it. Tonight, though, he’s grateful for the work he can put into finding some hand lotion in the dresser; to tugging Looch’s pants down to his ankles and kissing him slow and wet as he works the first couple of fingers in.

“Feels kinda weird,” Looch says, when Johnny asks after a few minutes, and then quickly adds, “but like, in a good way. Don’t look at me like that!”

“It’s really good when you do it right,” Johnny says, leaning back over so he’s halfway slumped against Looch’s side, fingers working and face buried in Looch’s warm, slightly sweaty neck. “I just wanna do it right.”

“Overachiever,” Looch laughs, and then, “Ow, hey, no biting, remember? No hickeys!”

Johnny snickers into the curve of his throat, and plants a kiss over the reddening welt before adding a third finger.

“Oh,” says Looch, only the word is fractured into pieces, stumbling one over the other.

“Yeah?” says Johnny.


“Yeah.”

“I always like it when you…” Johnny trails off in concentration, curling his fingers on the slow outward drag, and quietly claims victory when Looch swallows a sudden, surprised breath. “Right?”

“You have a condom, right?” Looch pants, and Johnny does the thing with his fingers again, just to watch him shiver, and enjoy the way Looch rides back on his fingers for more.

“Duh,” says Johnny. “You wanna?”

Looch kisses him in answer, hauling Johnny down with him and moaning a complaint into his mouth when Johnny’s fingers leave him empty in favor of fumbling for the condom.

“Okay, flip over,” Johnny tells him, patting Looch’s hip when he’s ready, and Looch does.

His dick is flushed dark, wet with precome, and he grinds his hips shamelessly against the bedcover while he waits for Johnny to get his shit together. Johnny, who pauses to watch appreciatively, a hand on his own dick, slicking on some extra hand lotion for good measure.

“Whenever you’re ready, man,” Looch grumbles into the sheet, swiping a hand out blindly for Johnny’s knee, and flapping awkwardly at it. “Unless you wanna watch me hump this bed all night.”

Johnny smacks his ass in retaliation, laughing at the surprised yelp this earns him, and Looch’s bleary eye opening enough to glare at him. “Fine, then. C’mere.”

He tugs Looch up by the hips, letting him lean forward heavily against the head of the bedframe
while Johnny slowly starts to ease into him.

“You’ll tell me if you don’t like it, right?”

Looch groans, going momentarily rigid, and then easing back in increments. “Will your perfectionist ego be able to take it if I don’t?”


Looch laughs and then moans, as the movement presses them closer together. “Go for it,” he pants. “Seriously, do it already.”

Johnny leans down and plants a kiss on his shoulder, before easing out a bit, and thrusting back in. Not hard, but not in excruciatingly hesitant increments anymore, either. He thinks about how tight he always feels, the first few minutes they do this the other way around; just on the edge of too much, losing himself in the rhythm of Looch’s body, letting go of the tightly-wound knot of rigid control that most days seems to be all that’s holding him all in one piece.

He thinks about it, and he tries to reverse the effect. Setting up a steady, predictable rhythm, and counting Looch’s breaths as they settle out to match, under Johnny’s hand splayed for stability around the curve of his ribs.

Not that this method is terribly sustainable. Soon, Johnny is panting harder than Looch, holding onto his own control by a thread as he drives in deep, working the angle until they’re both shaking, and the bedframe is knocking mercilessly against the wall where Looch has his white-knuckled grip on it.

“Good thing they’ve got the TV on so loud,” Johnny laughs, breathlessly. Looch makes a nonverbal sound of agreement, somewhere between a moan and a snicker. “Shit, dude, I’m gonna-- Can I..?”

He’s not even really sure what he’s asking for, just that Looch is hot and tight and slick around him, and every time he moves or shifts, or draws in another deep breath, Johnny loses his mind a little bit. It’s not the same as being fucked, himself. There isn’t the same feeling of being enveloped, swallowed by sensation on all sides; the narrowing focus of nothing beyond their two bodies, their breath. He’s more aware of the room, the party, the buzzing of alcohol in his brain, and the raindrop-patter quickness of his heartbeats.

“Yeah,” Looch says, breathless. “Get me off, too, while you’re at it.”

“If you have time to be a smartass right now, I’m doing something wrong,” Johnny shoots back, but he curls fingers around Looch’s dick and starts working him to their rhythm.

Looch is usually kind of stoic in bed, but Johnny can always tell when he’s about to come, by the stream of disjointed filth that starts tumbling out of him. Moaning, “Fuck, fuck, J. Come on, don’t stop.” And now with the addition of threats, stilted between each thrust of Johnny’s hips, warning, “Don’t you dare fucking stop, don’t you dare.”

It’s all Johnny can do not to come. Looch’s dick is leaking and wet under his fingers, easing the quick pace. He loves that Looch gets this fucked up for him, for something he can do, even if he’s kind of out of practice and probably sloppy as hell. His hips stuttering and nearly losing his balance, trying with everything he’s got to control the movements and not just start slamming into Looch like he wants.

Even just thinking about it too hard is too much. He feels it hit him like a wave, dragging him with it before he can pause or backpedal. Looch feels impossibly tight around him, moaning as he feels Johnny come, even through the condom.
“You suck,” Looch mumbles, where his face is still pressed against his forearms, as Johnny slumps against him.

Johnny heaves a shaky sigh. His legs feel like they’re about to give out, and he’s suddenly really, really aware of his knees, where they’re bent at a weird, kind of painful angle. “Nah, dude. I got you.”

He pulls Looch down to the bed, managing to keep his softening dick buried inside him as he resumes work with his hand. He throws a leg over Looch’s hip, encouraging him to ride back a little, even as Johnny starts to feel almost painfully sensitive. It makes his eyes water, and his breath hitch, and it’s not the same as that fucked out, enveloped feeling, but it’s close. Close to the edge of that blinding loss of control, where all he’s really focusing on is the feel and shape of Looch’s dick in his hand. The way Looch shakes when he rubs over the head, and the thick, slick weight of him right before he comes between Johnny’s fingers.

Johnny lets his dick slide free, finally, and curls tighter around Looch, feeling the heavy pace of his breathing.

“Are we cuddling?” Looch asks, after a couple of minutes of the two of them lying silently like this.

“No,” says Johnny. “Fuck you. I just don’t want to move yet.”

“Right,” says Looch. He turns until they’re lying face to face, and when Johnny opens his eyes, Looch’s are only inches away from his; dark and long-lashed and crinkled in amusement.

“Right,” Johnny echoes. He needs to get up and toss the condom, find his pants, maybe find a laundry hamper or something to stuff this blanket into. Instead, he asks, “You think this would work, I mean. If we tried to make this a thing?”

“A thing?” Looch says, and Johnny’s relieved not to hear anything but genuine curiosity in his tone. “Like, what, us? Dating or something? Being a couple?”

Hearing the words out loud makes Johnny flush hot, in spite of himself. He shrugs noncommittally.

“We could try,” Looch says, slowly, but he doesn’t sound convinced.

Deep down, Johnny understands. He sighs, and Looch makes an agreeing face.

“At least the sex is good,” Johnny says, and Looch laughs. “Right?”

“Yeah, dude,” Looch agrees. “Great, even.”

Johnny thinks about kissing him, thinks about scooting closer and running his hand down the smooth plane of Looch’s hip. Mostly, he thinks about how much easier it would feel, if they were both just a little bit stupider.

They compose themselves and wander downstairs, eventually. Krejci calls Looch over, stuffing a controller into his hands. Looch glances back at Johnny, who just waves him off.

He gets himself a red plastic party cup of water from the tap and wanders outside to the back deck. It’s a nice night; warm and pleasant, with a breeze rustling the leaves of a big oak tree that dominates one side of the yard. Johnny leans back, staring up through the branches and trying to imagine he can see the hint of stars here and there, not drowned out by the glow of city lights.

“Oh, you’re still here.”
Johnny turns sharply, nearly spilling his water as he strains his eyes against the dark. At the far end of the deck, something moves, and then Seguin’s silhouette emerges, beer bottle in hand.

“Yeah,” Johnny says. “Man, what the hell is your problem with me, anyway?”

Seguin bristles. “Fuck off, I don’t have a problem.”

Johnny snorts, taking a gulp of water. “Sure, man. Whatever you say.”

“Douche,” says Seguin.

“Dick,” says Johnny.

He turns back to stare out over the dark yard, and next to him, Seguin does the same.

“What’re you drinking?” Seguin asks, after a minute.

“Water.”

Seguin makes a derisive noise. “Right. You want a real drink?”

“Are you seriously offering?” Johnny asks, and Seguin shrugs, still staring straight ahead. “Nah, I’m good.”

“Suit yourself.” Seguin shrugs, dropping his empty on the deck where it rolls away past their feet, and pulls a fresh bottle out of his hoodie pocket.

Johnny watches him take the first couple of swigs, finally asking, “So like, what’s your problem with Patrice and Malkin?”

There’s a not-so-small part of himself that just wants to keep poking this hornet’s nest until he gets the response he’s expecting.

Seguin blinks over at him again. He takes another swallow of his drink, like that'll help him think of something clever.

"For the record, asshole, I've been friends with Bergy longer than you ever will be."

"You didn't answer my question, jackass," Johnny shoots back. He feels like he's standing on the razor's edge of something. He's never gotten into a fight off the ice before, but he could start. This is the guy he could be now.

Seguin is glaring. "I don't have a problem with Bergy and Malkin."

"You sure seem like you do."

"Like you know shit about us," Seguin says, but the words sound more defensive than angry. "Bergy only invites you to stuff because he feels bad for you, after your stupid breakup."

Johnny’s hands ball into fists at his sides, and he forces himself to take a step back. "You’re so full of shit. You’re *jealous*, aren’t you? You’re jealous of me and Malkin and anyone else who might get in the way of your precious little bromance.” The words are spilling out of him and he can’t seem to stop them. “You know it’s not gonna be his fault when he finally gets sick of your bigoted shit and ditches you for good, right?"

He knows he’s pushed too far, by the way Seguin’s face hardens; slack, drunken disregard
Johnny’s heart is pounding in his chest, the adrenaline pumping so fast through his veins he can practically hear it rushing in his ears.

*Fight. Fight. Fight.*

"I know your type," Johnny says. He doesn’t move for a long moment, and neither does Seguin. Johnny doesn’t know where all this anger has come from so suddenly. He’s never felt particularly protective of Patrice, even as he watched the whole Malkin thing unfold.

Seguin’s eyes narrow. “My type?”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, derisively. “The type of homophobic asshole I’ve been dealing with since ninth grade.”

“I’m not--” Seguin starts, and then glares when Johnny raises his eyebrows incredulously. “Look, just because I don’t think about stuff the same way you do doesn’t mean I think it’s wrong.”

“Still makes you a douche, though.”

“At least I’m not a stuck up prick with a stick up my ass who thinks I’m better than everyone.”

Johnny glares. “I do not think I’m better than everyone.”

Seguin rolls his eyes. “Okay.”

“I don’t!” Johnny nearly shouts, forcing himself to take a deep breath before adding, “Just you, maybe.”

Seguin gives an incredulous snort, taking a swig of his beer and shaking his head. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that.”

He leans back over the railing, and Johnny makes a face as soon as his head is turned.

Johnny is just about to give up and go back inside when Seguin asks, “So like, what was it like, anyway?”

“What was what like?” Johnny asks, caught off his guard and frowning at the sudden change in Seguin’s tone.

“Ninth grade, I mean,” Seguin says, hesitantly. “When you guys, like, told everybody about…”

“About being gay?”

“Yeah.” Seguin looks so relieved at not having to say the word that Johnny’s urge to punch him comes surging back before he can quell it.

“It sucked,” he says, bristling. “It sucked a whole lot. I never wanted that kind of attention.”

“Seems to have worked out pretty okay for you, though, in the end?”
Johnny has to force himself to keep from denying this point blank. Finally, he shrugs. “Could’ve been worse, I guess. Way worse.”

“Yeah,” says Seguin, slowly. “Yeah.”

Johnny glances over at him. “You know, if you’re really worried about Bergeron taking any heat for dating Malkin—”

“I’m not,” says Seguin, so quickly that it seems to catch them both by surprise. “I uh, I mean, he seems to be doing pretty okay with... everything.”

“He does,” Johnny agrees. He sighs, finishing his water and crumpling up the cup. “Man, if it’s really that much of a pain in your ass that I’m here, I can just—”

“Nah.” Seguin shakes his head. “It’s fine.”

“Okay,” Johnny says, hesitantly. He stands awkwardly, listening to the mingled shouts of triumph and groans of despair emanating from the video game match inside.

“You and Looch really aren’t a thing?” Seguin blurs, finally, causing Johnny to look over and see the way Seguin’s eyeing him, curiously.

“No,” Johnny says. “We’re really not. You’re really not a homophobe?”

“Really not.” Seguin shakes his head. He takes another swig of beer before asking, “How old were you, when you knew?”

“Knew what?”

“Knew you were, you know, gay.” Seguin hisses the word at last, like it’s some big secret, and Johnny has to stop himself from laughing.

“Seriously? I don’t know. Maybe like, six or something?”

Seguin goggles at him. “Six? You’re supposed to know that early?”

“I don’t know if you’re supposed to,” he says, hesitantly. “I’ve never asked anyone else. I just think that’s when I had my first crush, that I can remember.”

A kid on Johnny’s mites team. He’d worn a bright red helmet, covered in stickers, and he’d never stop smiling from the second his skates hit the ice. Johnny remembers watching him and feeling a sharp tug in his chest, every time. Johnny doesn’t even remember that kid’s name, now, but he still remembers that feeling; like he’d use just about any excuse just to stand near him between drills. It had felt so honest and normal that it never even occurred to Johnny to feel weird about it.

“Oh.” Seguin is watching him again with that speculating stare.

“Just try talking to Patrice again,” Johnny says. “Maybe he’d be…”

Be what? More knowledgeable about sexual identity stuff? Less blatantly awkward? Way more appropriate to talk about this stuff with, than some guy Seguin barely knows and doesn’t like?

“He’s been busy,” Seguin says, cagily. He stares straight ahead into the dark yard, clinking out an off-kilter rat-a-tat with his beer bottle against the railing.

“He’s your best friend, though.”
“Yeah,” Seguin snaps, sounding considerably more like the Seguin Johnny is familiar with. “Well, I don’t know about that, anymore. He’s been kind of a dick to me, ditching me for Malkin all over the place. You’re wrong, though. I’m not jealous,” he adds, glaring. “It’s just the truth.”

“Yeah,” Johnny concedes. “I think there’s some kind of drama going on with Malkin, like, staying with Patrice? He wouldn’t give me details, but he skipped soccer camp with me last weekend. I was surprised Malkin wasn’t here with him, tonight.”

“Bergeron said Malkin had something with his guys at Consol,” Seguin says, morosely. “Otherwise, he’d probably have ditched tonight, too.”

Johnny doesn’t know what to say to this, besides maybe to ask exactly how shithammered drunk Seguin actually is.

“You want some water?” he asks, instead, but Seguin shakes his head.

He’s looking at Johnny again, wearing a fixed, curious expression, his eyes overbright.

“If you and Looch aren’t together,” Seguin says, slowly, chewing his lip, “would you kiss me?”

Johnny stares. “... Are you fucking with me?”

Seguin looks like he almost wants to say yes, but finally, he shakes his head.

“You’re really drunk,” Johnny says.

“Yeah,” Seguin agrees. “Otherwise I wouldn’t have said anything. I still think you’re kind of an asshole, dude.”

“I--” Johnny stammers, somewhere between renewed rage and disbelief. “You’re kind of an asshole! You’re totally an asshole! What makes you think-- I’m not just--”

“Dude, chill,” Seguin says, although he’s looking a little uncomfortable, edging down the railing like he thinks Johnny might take a swing at him. As far as Johnny’s concerned, it’s not entirely out of the question.

“I’m not just here to be some convenient gay experiment for you,” Johnny snaps back, finally collecting himself. “Or just so you can-- can prove you’re not a bigot, or whatever.”

“This is why people think you’re stuck up, you know,” Seguin snorts. “The world doesn’t actually revolve around you.”

“I don’t--”

“I think I’m more bi, anyway,” Seguin mutters, completely derailing Johnny’s thought.

“You’re... what?”

Seguin shrugs, fiddling with his beer bottle. “I’ve never messed around with a dude, so I can’t say for sure. Maybe if I could kiss you--”

“Never gonna happen.”

“Snob.”

Johnny snorts a laugh. “Maybe. Maybe you just aren’t used to hitting on people with standards.”
“I’m not hitting on you!” Seguin bursts out, indignantly. Then he quickly lowers his voice, with a nervous glance toward the house. “This is not me hitting on you, dude. You should be so fucking lucky. If I really wanted to turn the charm on right now, this’d be a whole different story.”

“God, I hope you remember this conversation when you sober up,” Johnny tells him, earnestly. “I wish I could be there.”

“Ugh, blow me,” says Seguin.

“Definitely not,” says Johnny. “I’m going to go back inside now, before this gets any weirder. Go drink some water, and try not to pass out where nobody can find you.”

Seguin throws him a mock salute that Johnny returns, sliding open the glass doors and slipping back inside to the noise and light.
July: Geno

As the weeks pass, Geno settles into an uneasy calm at the Bergerons. School ends, and summer training begins for both him and Patrice. Patrice tutors summer school students afterward, most days, so Geno occupies himself hanging out with Sid or Flower in the intervening hours, playing video games, reading, or putting in extra hours on the ice when they can.

He doesn’t talk about his parents, and they don’t ask, which means they’ve probably figured out more than they’re letting on. Geno feels sick in the pit of his stomach when he thinks about it, making up half-assed lies about his car being in the shop, just to avoid telling his friends. It doesn’t feel right, none of it feels right, but every time he opens his mouth to say... anything, anything at all about it, the words stick in his throat.

“Why?” asks Patrice, when Geno mentions it one afternoon on the ride home. “They’re going to find out eventually, right? Why not just tell them?”

“They don’t ask questions,” Geno says, staring out the passenger side window without really seeing anything.

“Uh,” Patrice says. “O... kay…”

“Means they already know,” Geno says, a little more abruptly than he means to. From the corner of his eye, he sees Patrice’s eyebrows hike up.

“There’s no need to bite my head off, jeez,” he says, never taking eyes off the road, but his expression is haughty and affronted. “I’m on your side, dude. Remember?”

Geno reaches for his hand, giving it an apologetic squeeze. “I know.”

Patrice squeezes back. “So then, what’s the big deal?”

“They not ask, means they already know, or they guess they know. They know, but not saying anything, means they…” Geno trails off, biting his lip as he scowls down into his lap. “Means they feel sorry for me.”

Saying the words aloud makes him cringe. Partially for the truth of them, but also for their petty, cowardly implications.

Patrice seems to read his mind. “Isn’t that kind of lame, though? I mean, they’re your friends. Wouldn’t they just want to be supportive? I can’t really imagine Flower sending you a sympathy bouquet or something. Maybe they’d be helpful.”

“What I need help with?” Geno asks, stubbornly. He doesn’t blame Patrice for rolling his eyes.

“How the fuck should I know? Maybe tell them and you’ll find out.”

“You too bossy,” Geno tells him.

Patrice snorts. “Good.”

“Fine.”

Patrice smirks, and Geno prods him in the side, where he’s ticklish.
“Driving here!” Patrice informs him, swatting his hand away, but he smiles the rest of the way home, and even the knot in Geno’s stomach feels lighter for it.

Patrice’s mother is in the kitchen when they get in, stirring something in a saucepan over low heat.

“Hey,” she says, as they clatter through, dropping gear bags on the stairs down to the laundry room and rummaging around in the fridge for drinks. “Have a seat, I need to talk to you both. It’s a good thing,” she adds hastily, when Patrice’s eyes go comically wide over the rim of his can.

Geno tugs out a stool at the breakfast bar for Patrice before sitting himself, toying with the tab on his soda and trying not to look too amused.

“What’s up?” Patrice asks, ignoring them both and perching on his stool with a coolly dignified look.

Sylvie wipes her hands on a dish towel, settling back to lean against the counter as the contents of her pot simmers. “Patrice, I don’t know if you remember, I mentioned it a couple of months ago, but your second cousin, Jen, is getting married next weekend. You remember her?”

“Yeah,” says Patrice, hesitantly. “I don’t remember any wedding, though.”

“No, I didn’t think so,” says his mother, appearing to stifle an eyeroll, and Geno is struck for the thousandth time by how many mannerisms she shares with her son. He thinks of his own mother, of the way Denis had loved teasing them for all their mundane little commonalities, and something inside him aches.

Oblivious next to him, Patrice swivels restlessly on his stool. “Okay, so what about it?”

“Well, we weren’t planning on going,” Sylvie says, “or else I would have reminded you weeks ago. But your father ended up getting this Friday off, so we figured, why not? It’s been awhile since had an excuse to get out of town for a couple of days.”

“Mom,” Patrice says, an edge of panic in his voice, “this weekend? Like, this coming weekend? I have weight training on Friday! And Geno has ice time. And I have three students booked that afternoon in the tutoring center, and I’d have to call Johnny right now to make sure he’s covered for soccer camp and--”

“Who ever said you two were invited?” his mother says, staring down her nose at him with the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “Nobody in their right mind wants a couple of teenage boys at a wedding. No, I’m sorry, but you’re going to have to stay home without us this weekend. Try and manage your disappointment, okay?”

“I--” says Patrice, before cutting himself off, and looking at her. He looks at Geno, who has to take a hasty gulp of soda to keep a straight face.

“We’re trusting you both,” she says, firmly, looking back and forth at both of them. “We’re trusting that you’ll be... safe.”

“Oh, God,” Patrice groans. “Mom.”

“I mean it!” she says, and he quiets down, although Geno can’t help noticing the way his whole face has flushed pink. Geno feels a little hot around the collar, himself, and he suddenly feels very interested in his lap. “We’re not idiots, we know we can’t police your every move, but please just promise me--”

“We won’t do anything stupid,” Patrice says, hurriedly. “Can we stop talking about this, now?”
His mother fixes him with a steely gaze. “That includes not letting Tyler talk you into throwing any big parties, right?”

“... Right,” grumbles Patrice, and Geno snickers. Patrice shoots a sidelong glare at him.

“Good,” Sylvie says. She picks up her spoon again, and gives the saucepan another stir. “We’ll leave some money for food, and we’ll expect everything to be as we left it when we get back on Sunday afternoon. The superglue is in the drawer in the laundry room.”

“Nice vote of confidence,” Patrice says, and she beams at him. “C’mon, G. Let’s go watch TV somewhere that isn’t here.”

“The table will need setting in an hour,” she calls after them.

“No problem,” says Geno, as Patrice hauls him off his stool and practically drags him from the room.

“Kiss-ass.”

“What?” says Geno, innocently. “Just being helpful.”

“I used to be the popular son, you know that?” Patrice says, but he curls up against Geno’s side as they settle together on the couch, reaching for the remote.

“There, there,” Geno says, patting his arm. After a minute or so of watching Patrice scroll idly through channels, he says, “So. Two nights alone.”

The pink returns to Patrice’s cheeks as he nods. “Yeah.”

Geno nudges him in the side, and Patrice nudges back, glancing over with a shy smile. “What?”

“What you want to do?”

Patrice bites his lip, apparently fascinated by a commercial for buy one/get one lighting fixtures. “I... don’t know,” he says, slowly. “What do you wanna do?”

Geno would have to be stupid not to have noticed Patrice’s renewed shyness around the subject of sex, in the past few weeks since Geno’s been living here. They’ve fooled around a little, but mostly just stuck to making out, even when his parents aren’t around. It might worry him, if he had the energy for it, but a separate part of him has been almost embarrassingly grateful. Now, though, he feels something clicking back into gear.

“How about I cook you dinner?” he says, and Patrice tears his gaze away from the TV to look at him.

“Cook me dinner?”


Patrice rolls his eyes. “I’m not that bad.”


“Oh,” says Patrice. He looks the way Geno was afraid he’d look, after a pronouncement like that; apologetic and sad. Geno backpedals, hastily.

“No, no, is good thing!” He insists, begging Patrice with his eyes to stop looking like that, and go
back to the comfortable heckling of moments before. “Will be fun, I promise.”

“Dinner,” Patrice repeats, and this time Geno is relieved to hear him sound more confident in the idea. “Yeah, dinner would be great.”

“Great,” echoes Geno, and he leans over and kisses Patrice’s cheek until Patrice giggles and swats him away.

Geno spends the week daydreaming about cooking.

By Friday morning, the daydreaming has turned into a fizz of nerves, not entirely unpleasant. Even skating can’t fully distract him, and by the time he hauls his gear bag out to the parking lot to wait for Patrice, he can’t sit still.

“Your car still in the shop?” Sid asks, following him out and toeing the concrete curb idly while Geno paces.

“Yeah,” Geno says, avoiding Sid’s eyes. “Maybe done soon, but don’t know.”

They stand in silence for awhile, the wind picking up around them and pulling rain-heavy clouds close overhead. The sky is the same color as the sidewalk, a thick swath of heavy, leaden gray as far as the eye can see. In the distance, Geno hears the rumble of thunder.

Sid looks at the time on his phone, then looks at Geno. Geno pauses momentarily in his pacing the sidewalk edge, one foot poised over the low drop-off, and then resumes the movement, watching the treeline behind the rink roof over Sid’s shoulder.

“Hey.” Sid looks distinctly uncomfortable, idling foot to foot with hands stuffed in his hoodie pockets. “So. You’re okay, right? Like, with this whole car…thing. And Patrice. And whatever.”

It’s the first time Geno can remember Sid actually saying Patrice’s first name, and he glances over in time to see Sid’s expression, like he’s still chewing the word and it tastes strange in his mouth. Geno grins and Sid ducks his head sheepishly.

“Awww, you concern,” Geno says. Sid makes a face at him. “I think is sweet. You so nice when no one looking. Better be careful or I tell other guys. You never hear end.”

“Sorry I asked,” says Sid, but he’s smiling now.


Sid *hmphs* acquiescently, glancing up at the darkening sky. “Your ride gonna be here soon?”

Geno checks the time. “Yeah. Should be twenty minutes more, maybe. Not bad. You go in, I be fine here.”

“Okay,” Sid says, but he waffles a moment. “You sure?”

“Yes, I sure,” Geno laughs, making shooing motions with his hands. “Go, go, I be fine. Not get kidnapped or take candy from strangers, remember to look both ways before crossing street. Promise.”

Sid snorts a laugh, but starts walking backwards. “Cool. Catch you Monday, G.”

“Remember to actually take rest day!” Geno calls after him, and Sid just sticks his tongue out, turning and heading off in the direction of his residence hall.
Geno is sitting on the curb when Patrice pulls up, the first drops of rain sending up a warm, heavy, wet-pavement smell. He slides in, and Patrice leans over to kiss him.

“Hey,” says Geno, when they break apart. The smile Patrice gives him sends a shivery little thrill through him that has nothing to do with the damp air.

“Hi,” says Patrice, pulling out of the lot. “How was was skating and stuff?”

“Eh, was skating. Was stuff,” Geno says, his fingers reclaiming their usual spot curled around Patrice’s next to the shifter. “How was weights?”

“Fine. Um.” Patrice glances over at him, color already high in his cheeks. “So you still wanna, like. Do stuff tonight?”

Geno snorts a laugh. “Been long time since you so shy with me.”

Patrice’s fingers tighten a little on Geno’s, and he shrugs. “Things’ve been weird. I didn’t know if you wanted…” he trails off, frowning. “I didn’t want to push.”

Geno nods, but he raises Patrice’s hand to brush a kiss against the ridge of his knuckles. “Things weird,” he says, “but still me. Still you. Still want to make you dinner and have fun while no parents around.”

“Cool,” says Patrice, and the color in his cheeks deepens, visible even in the waning early evening light. “We need to stop off at the store for anything?”

Geno shakes his head, leaning back against his seat, relaxing in increments. “No,” he says, when Patrice squeezes at his hand, prompting him. “No need stop. Home have everything.”

At the light, Patrice glances over at him. Geno can tell he’s trying to hide a smile and failing miserably.

“What,” he says. “You been casing the kitchen cupboards without me looking?”

Geno laughs, and then Patrice laughs, and they’re caught in each other for a moment. For longer than a moment, considering the guy in the Camaro behind them starts to beep.

“Could say that.” Geno agrees easily, trying not to laugh again at the embarrassed flush on Patrice’s face.

“God, shut up,” Patrice responds, but he lets himself laugh a little, and he doesn’t let go of Geno’s hand.

When they park in front of the house, Patrice leans in, and Geno closes the space between them without a second thought.

"We should go inside." Geno’s voice is loud in the claustrophobic car interior, with the wind and rain beginning to pick up outside around them. "Want to do stuff with you that neighbor not appreciate."

Patrice smirks at him and says, "What about dinner?"

“I make, I make,” Geno says, shunting Patrice into the house ahead of himself.

They drop their stuff in the hall and take up positions in the kitchen, Geno rummaging around in the fridge and cupboards, pulling things out and lining them up on the counter, and Patrice pulling one of
the breakfast bar stools around to perch on and and keep out of the way.

“Holy shit, what the hell are you making?” he asks, as Geno adds eggs and a bag of shredded pizza cheese to his pile.

“Ravioli,” Geno tells him, still rummaging and finally coming out with a package of chicken breast, checking the expiration date before adding, “and chicken. That okay?”

Patrice’s eyes go comically huge. “Dude,” he says, “you don’t have to do all that. I thought we’d just have like, pasta or something easy.”

Geno sets the oven to preheat before going over, placing a hand on each of Patrice’s thighs and leaning in to plant a kiss on his cheek. “Is easy-ish. And is pasta,” he says, grinning when Patrice makes a small noise of halfhearted protest. “Like cooking for you, thought it would be fun. You want something different?”

“No!” Patrice says, swatting Geno’s arm and rolling his eyes. “Geez, just…Thanks.” He smiles shyly. “You know where everything is?”

Geno considers for a moment. “Mostly. You have rolling pin?”

“Drawer next to the sink,” Patrice says, pointing. “Need me to do anything?”

“Could start water boiling,” Geno says, and Patrice slides off his stool to dig around in the cupboard. “No, bigger pot than that. Bigger than that, too.” Patrice gives him a withering look, finally digging out a stock pot and setting it on the counter with an exaggerated clunk. “Yes, that one work fine.”

Patrice makes a point of running into him on his way to the sink.

Geno grins, and Patrice makes a face at him, the both of them settling in together at the counter, as Geno dusts it with flour and starts to make the dough.

“You want to make the salad?” Geno asks, after a few minutes of quiet.

Patrice is perched next to him, messing around on Twitter, and he nods. “Sure.”

He plants a kiss to Geno’s shoulder, getting up to rummage through the fridge. By the time he’s dumped a bag of spinach into a bowl and chopped up some vegetables, the water is boiling and Geno has a neat little pile of ravioli ready to cook, cut out in circles with the rim of a water glass.

“You’re good at that,” Patrice observes, watching him roll out the last remnants of dough.

Geno dabs the remainder of the filling onto one half of the dough, folding over the other and pressing it down. “Similar to pelmeni,” he says, retrieving the glass. “But easier, because not having to stuff each one separately.”

“Pain in the ass?” Patrice asks, but Geno shrugs.

“Me and Denis have system,” he says. He pauses, frowning down at the dough in front of him. “Very efficient.”

Patrice is quiet for a long moment, as Geno concentrates very hard and tries to blink away the prickling at the corners of his eyes. He almost jumps at the hand suddenly, tentatively placed on his back, Patrice’s face warm where he presses it against Geno’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” Patrice, says, quietly.
Geno sniffs, wiping his face on his sleeve. “It’s fine,” he says, reaching back to find Patrice’s hand and give it a squeeze.

“Geno--”


They eat at the breakfast bar, because the dining room table feels too formal.

Some of the raviolis have come apart in cooking, but Patrice quells Geno’s frustration by heaping grated cheese and olive oil on his, and demolishing two bowls before Geno finishes his first.

“This is really, really good,” he says, unnecessarily, his mouth full of chicken. Then he catches Geno grinning at him. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” says Geno.

Patrice chews and swallows, wiping his face off with a napkin before sliding off his stool. He pushes Geno until they’re face to face, and crowds into the space between his legs, hands resting on his thighs, but not moving higher.

"Do you still want to?" Patrice asks. He sounds nervous.

"Yes," Geno says quietly. "Want to."

They leave the dishes on the table and go upstairs, Patrice tugging his shirt off and already working on his belt by the time they tumble onto his bed together in a heap. Geno lands on top of him, settling between his legs and taking over work on the belt as he leans down to fit their mouths together.

Geno is suddenly and intensely aware of Patrice’s hardon pressing into his hip through their clothes, and Patrice’s fingers digging into the bare skin of his bicep, pulling him closer until there’s barely breathing room between them. It makes the whole belt issue a bit more complicated, but with the way Patrice keeps sucking on his lip, panting breathless, ragged little moans into Geno’s mouth, he doesn’t care.

“What do you-?” Geno manages between kisses, but Patrice doesn’t even let him finish.

“Want you to fuck me,” he says, all in a rush. “Please, please.”

“Yeah,” Geno says again, pulse thudding in his ears. “Yes.”

He refocuses on Patrice’s pants, getting them undone and off in record time before ducking down and sucking the head of Patrice’s dick into his mouth. Patrice swears.

Geno doesn’t want to think about the restaurant, wants it to be the furthest thing from his mind, so of course that’s where he gets stuck, with his shirt over his head and his pants half unbuckled.

Patrice is naked, lovely in the dim light. Geno stares down at him and tries to memorize the way his nose slopes, its sharp-angled ski jump curve, the way his mouth curls up at the corners.

“G,” Patrice says, smiling, shy but defiantly bright. “You still in there?”


He shimmies out of his pants, shoving his underwear down with them.
Patrice bites his lip, meeting Geno’s eyes directly. “You, like, really want to, right? You’re into this? Because I don’t--”

He cuts himself off to laugh, and Geno wants to laugh too, wants to giggle at the absurdity of the statement. Of course he wants to. He’s done nothing but want to for months.

“Yes,” Geno repeats. It feels like the only word he knows.

“Yeah, okay,” Patrice says, still grinning, with this tilt to his mouth like he has all the answers. Brazen and sweet all at once, and Geno loves him.

“I love, you know?” Geno says aloud, when the words unstick in his throat.

Patrice blinks and then he smiles again, rolling close and kissing him in a seamless, fluid motion.

“Love you too,” Patrice says, and brings them even closer, hooking one of his legs over Geno’s thigh and lining their hips up.

“Shit,” Geno curses loud enough to startle them both. “Sorry, sorry. Was not expecting-- you feel good.”


They rut against each other for a while. This is still Patrice’s house, his bedroom, and everything about this is familiar as it is new.

“Patrice,” he tries, pulling away. His voice is low, hoarse. “How you want to start?”

Patrice blinks at him, and Geno stares back, panting slightly and so, so hard. He’s never been this hard before, has he? He honestly can’t remember.

“On, my, um,” he tries, and he’s blushing. “On my knees, maybe? Would that be easier?”


“Then I wanna be able to see you,” Patrice says, speaking so quickly, their words almost overlap. “I always like it that way.”

Geno grins at him and Patrice beams back, whole face lit up like morning. He ducks back in, kissing Geno again and tugging his arm until Geno’s weighing him down, pressed in so Geno can feel the quick-quick-fast rise and fall of the breath in his chest.

Patrice shifts a little and Geno moans into his mouth with the skin on skin contact, trying to get a hand between them to touch, to give them more, but Patrice pulls back, breaks the kiss, says, “Just. Just get the lube, ‘kay? Please?”

He looks half gone already, wearing a dopey little hopeful smile that Geno drops another quick kiss on before leaning up to rummage through the nightstand drawer. By the time he’s got a couple fingers slicked up, Patrice is palming his own dick, squeezing the base and looking desperate. He arches up for Geno, legs spread and yielding for the two slick fingers Geno fits in to start.

“Good?” Geno asks, his voice seeming jarringly loud in the quiet space punctuated only with their heavy breathing and Patrice’s occasional low groan as he adjusts to accommodate the stretch.

“Yeah,” Patrice nods. He shifts up and twists a little. “Deeper, c’mon. Do that-- the thing, where you go deeper and kind of--”
Geno presses his fingers in and curls them, giving a little twist that cuts Patrice off mid-sentence, head dropping back on the bedspread as he moans. Geno grins.

Patrice is panting, sighing, riding back on Geno’s hand with a purpose now. The head of his dick is shiny-slick with precome, heavy and dark against his belly, and Geno wants to touch, wants to lean down and lick and suck and drag Patrice’s brain through his dick using just his fingers and his tongue. But then, his own dick is aching hard between his legs, and more than anything else he wants the tight, hot pressure; he wants Patrice’s legs around him and his sharp-angled body spread open for Geno to fill.

“Can I? Ready?” he asks, and Patrice nods, arching again and fucking himself back on Geno’s hand.

He whines low in his chest as Geno’s fingers slip out in favor of rolling on the condom, eyes slitted open and reflecting palely in the low light coming in through the window. Geno slips back between his legs, hooking one over his shoulder and wedging a pillow under Patrice’s ass before starting to push in.


Geno just shrugs, turning to nip the inside of Patrice’s conveniently placed knee. “You,” he says. “Just…you.”

Patrice makes a face at him, or tries, mostly wincing and readjusting his hips a little. “Hey. Come on. And uh,” his cheeks flush, but he smiles a little. “Go hard, okay? I like it when you make me feel it.”

Geno is glad his body seems to know what it’s doing, because he’s pretty sure his brain shorts out for a moment or two.

“Geno,” Patrice gasps. His lower lip is white where his teeth are pressing into it. “Christ, G.”

“You okay?” Geno asks, and his voice definitely isn’t his own, rough in a way that sounds foreign to him. “Feel good?”

Patrice closes his eyes and nods, eyelashes stuttering against the slope of his cheeks, and Geno loves him in this way that’s almost too big for him. For both of them.

“I feel...’ he trails off. He reaches down, shifting a little, like he wants to touch the place where their bodies are joined together. He doesn’t, stopping a little short, and Geno doesn’t breathe for any of it. “Full.”

It’s hard to pay much attention to anything after that. Geno drops his own free hand, pressing fingertips to the stretch of the rim, feeling it from the outside and the inside. Feeling it when Patrice shudders so hard they almost lose their balance.

“You gonna kill me,” Geno says. “I don’t mind, though.”

Patrice gives a breathless laugh, but doesn’t say anything, reaching up and hooking his arm around Geno’s neck and dragging him down so they can kiss. It’s sloppy, messy. Their mouths don’t quite connect, but it’s okay. It’s more than okay.

“You close?” he asks. It sounds a little like begging.

“Yeah,” Patrice breathes, nodding. His eyes are cloudy, mouth bitten red. “Yeah, G. Please. You don’t know what this feels like.”
The thought hits him like a ton of bricks. Imagining what that might be like. What it would feel like to have Patrice inside of him.

It’s almost too much.

It is too much, because Geno’s coming then, the orgasm surprising him, surprising them both.

He catches himself before he falls forward, hand slipping away from Patrice’s dick to rest on the pillow behind his head. He can’t seem to catch his breath, even in the long, stretching seconds after he’s done.

“Sorry,” he mumbles, catching his mouth against the smooth slope of Patrice’s cheek. “Sorry.” He pulls back, trying to smile, but it’s harder than he wants it to be. The muscles in his face are refusing to cooperate. “You too much for me.”

Patrice laughs, a low, smooth rumble, and Geno laughs with him, surprise tinging the ends of it, because he’s not sure how he got to be so lucky.

When he’s got his coordination back, Geno reaches down, fingers tangling with Patrice’s where he’s still jerking himself off. Half lazy, half desperate. He picks up the pace, though, with Geno’s hand curling around his, and less than a minute later he’s coming, muffling a shout in the pillow.

Geno pulls out reluctantly, waiting until both of their breathing has slowed before he slips down the hall to the bathroom. He gets rid of the condom, sticky and gross, and washes his hands, wetting a hand towel for Patrice.

It’s easy to climb back into bed, easy to press a messy kiss to Patrice’s hairline, and wrap an arm around his shoulders. Everything about this is easy, including the part where they wake up together hours and hours later to the soft filter of sunlight through the window and the less pleasant sound of the alarm blaring.

“Oh my god,” Patrice mutters under his breath, rolling over and pressing his palms to his eyes. “Make the noise stop.”

“Argh, ugh,” Geno says, groping around until he finds the alarm and gives it a couple of good smacks. Mercifully, it shuts up.

“What time is it?” Patrice groans, yanking the covers up further over his head.

“Seven,” says Geno, and Patrice groans again, louder.

“I have to get ready for soccer.”

“I come with,” Geno says, curling closer and leaving half a dozen sloppy kisses across Patrice’s shoulder, basking in the sleepy smile this earns him.

“You sure?”

Geno hums in agreement. “I sure,” he says. “But not much time. Should probably share shower, so we don’t be late.”

He rolls out of bed, and a moment later Patrice scrambles to follow.
July: Patrice

Chapter Notes

Heyyyy party people! So, a couple things:

First, some of you may have noticed that the chapter count went from 77 to 78. That's...mostly because I can't count, and I started posting this thing in a fit of blind panic which made me even less able to count. Oops.

Second, I've decided to revamp the last few chapters. Trust me, this is a good thing. Since I've had all these months of posting to give myself a break from thinking about the actual writing, I figured out how to fix a couple things I wasn't sure about before. And with any luck, there won't be an interruption in the posting schedule! Don't worry! THIS THING WILL END, PINKY-PROMISE. I just wanted to give y'all a heads up that I'm doing my level goddamn best to give you an ending you deserve, after sticking with it for this long.

Seriously, you're all awesome, even those of you who haven't commented or whatever. Thanks so much for hanging out! ...Oh, and if you haven't left a comment, but you're thinking about it, you should know that COMMENTS THRILL ME! I require a full cheerleading squad complete with pom-poms and aerial acrobatics to accomplish pretty much any task ever, so it's ridiculously rewarding and gratifying whenever I hear from you guys. I can't say that enough. <3

Okay, enough from me. Enjoy! :)

On Sunday, Patrice wakes up to a slough of texts from Marchy.

hey what're u doing 2day?

a bunch of us are getting food and seeing pacific rim u should come

come get paaaaaaaaancaaaaaaaaaakes

cswy plaza village @ 11:30. b there, bitch.

bring ur russian. i know u don't have plans already, ur so boring. >:

Patrice snorts, and next to him in bed, Geno grunts and opens his eyes.

“Wanna go to breakfast with Marchy and some of my guys?”

Geno grunts again and rolls over to bury his face in the pillow, throwing a heavy arm across Patrice’s chest.

“When?” he mumbles.

Patrice checks the time on his phone. “Like, an hour-ish?”
Geno sighs, muffled into the pillow.

“Come on,” Patrice wheedles, nudging him in the side with an elbow until Geno turns his face enough to fix Patrice with one bleary eye. “I’ll buy us a pile of French toast as tall as you are.”

“You buy last time,” Geno grumbles.

“So get me back when you get a new job,” says Patrice. “I know you’ve been looking. I heard you talking to Ovi about it last week.”

“Nosy.”

“Yeah.” Patrice grins, and Geno sticks out his tongue.


“I like the way you think,” Patrice tells him, and plants a smacking kiss on his forehead before rolling out of bed to find clothes.

Patrice hadn’t thought much about what Marchy had meant by ‘a bunch of us’, so when he and Geno show up around a quarter to twelve to be confronted with what looks like half of the Causeway varsity team, he hesitates.

“Uh, are you cool with this?” he asks Geno, paused in the entryway where they can hear the group before they even see it. Several tables pushed together in the farthest corner, but still clearly audible over the general midday iHop hubbub.

Geno looks a little frantic around the eyes, but he shrugs and tightens his grip on Patrice’s hand.

“They don’t know about... stuff with me?”

“They know you’re staying with me right now, but that’s it,” Patrice says, anxiously glancing up into Geno’s face and wishing he could read the expression there. “And that’s only because I had to blow Segs off a couple weeks ago, so I had to give him some kind of explanation. I keep telling you, I’m not going to tell anyone your business, dude.”

Geno nods, slowly, but his eyebrows remain pensive.

“Are you waiting to be seated?” asks a hostess, appearing out of nowhere with notepad in hand. “I can put you on the list--”

“We’re meeting friends,” Patrice cuts her off, pointing. She follows his finger, her expression becoming immediately less friendly. Marchy is kneeling on his chair, working on a towering stack of what looks like all of the butter, jam, and creamer cups from all four tables. “Sorry,” says Patrice, as her expression clouds over. “We’ll just seat ourselves.”

He grabs Geno’s hand, hauling him across the crowded floor. “If you wanna chip in,” he mutters, “leave a really big tip.”

Geno laughs.

They pull up seats at the far end of the tables just in time for Marchy’s stack to topple over, condiment packets splashing into coffee cups and water glasses and creating momentary chaos.

“You’re late!” Marchy yells at them, ignoring the dirty looks cast at him by Segs and Krug who were closest to ground-zero.
Geno passes Segs his napkin, and Segs takes it without comment, looking only mildly resentful. Patrice counts this as progress.

“Does it really count as being late if I just assume you’ll never be on time?” Patrice asks, and Marchy tosses an empty creamer cup at him.

“Ass,” says Marchy, haughtily. “I just thought, since Thorty and Khu are both leaving this month for their big, fancy college training camps, it’d be cool to all get together one last time.”

“So sentimental,” Thorty coos, while Khu blushes. “I might almost consider missing you, Marchand.”

“Just remember us little people, when you’re rich and famous,” Patrice tells them.

“Please,” says Thorty. “If anyone at this table is making it bigtime, it’s gonna be you, Bergy.”

Patrice avoids responding, choosing instead to bury his face in a menu, as Geno snickers next to him.

“Where are you looking at applying, anyway?” Thorty asks, leaning back over once they’ve all ordered and conversations have resumed around them. “I haven’t heard you say anything about it.”

Patrice shrugs. He can feel Geno’s eye on him as he quietly sips his water. “I’m still looking, I guess.”

“Do hockey programs, or..?”

“Yeah,” says Patrice. “I mean, I think so.”

“He worried hockey too risky in college,” Geno cuts in, ignoring the disgruntled look Patrice shoots him. “Keep saying it too big a gamble with his very important future.”

“Shut up, I do not!” Patrice says indignantly, as Thorty guffaws. “He’s paraphrasing. I just mean, like, I want to make sure I have backup plans, in case it doesn’t work out.”

“That’s why you’re the smart one,” says Thorty. “Then again, I guess if hockey doesn’t work out, I can always just come home and work for my dad doing roofing.” He grimaces.

“Looch is the smart one,” Patrice says, glancing up the table to where Looch is holding court with Davy and a handful of underclassmen, orating about fantasy baseball stats. “I’m just trying to be practical.”


Before he can intervene, however, Geno says, “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Was thinking about business,” Geno says, taking a sip of water and avoiding Patrice’s eyes. “Restaurant management. But maybe Patrice is right, should think about different options.”

Patrice feels the overwhelming urge to apologize, without knowing exactly what for. He just hates the way Geno’s face shutters every time a subject even only adjacent to the rift with his parents comes up. He feels responsible, too, for his nosy friends and their prying, well-meant questions.

“Restaurant management? That’s kinda random, huh? Cool, though, I guess.” Thorty is rambling on,
oblivious, and Geno just nods, politely.

“Thought about culinary school,” Geno says, accent stumbling through the syllables as he grins sheepishly. “But that’s not as practical.”

“Okay, when have I ever judged your future plans?” Patrice demands, all anxiety momentarily forgotten.

Geno pats his hand. “Never,” he says, solemnly. “Not out loud, anyway. Your face just does that thing.”

Thorty laughs, and Patrice’s protestations are drowned out as their food arrives.

By the time they’re done trying to see how many all-you-can-eat pancakes Marchy can, in fact, consume, they’ve got about two minutes to make it over to the theater across the plaza square.

“God, that was gross,” Thorty groans, grabbing a toothpick on their way out.

“You’re the one who challenged me to do it,” Marchy says easily, as if forty-five seconds earlier he hadn’t looked like he was about to throw up. Patrice wishes he wasn’t actually so impressed. “Bergy, Malkin, you’re hitting the movie with us?”

“Yep,” Patrice says. The line for the electronic ticket kiosk outside the theater is already expansive, so he lets go of Geno’s hand, saying, “Hey, hold tight and I’ll go grab us tickets. Maybe Segs’ll let me cut in with him.”

By the time he gets there, however, Segs has been absorbed into the crowd of Davy, Looch, and their assorted underclassmen entourage, and he doesn’t seem to hear Patrice yelling to get his attention. Disgruntled and a little offended, Patrice takes a spot at the back of the line.

In the theater, Seguin’s already got an aisle seat staked out and immediately waves Marchy and Khu over. Patrice makes a mental pact with himself to confront Segs later, and deal with whatever this weirdness is that’s been creeping between them.

“Hey,” Looch leans across Geno and whispers over whatever trailer has shit exploding all over the screen, “we’re hitting the park a couple miles north after this if you guys wanna come. Johnny Toews said he’d come meet us, and we can mess around on the new soccer field they just put in.”

“All of us?” Patrice asks.

“Mmhmm, I think. That cool?”

Patrice looks at Geno, and Geno nods.

A couple seats down at the end of the row, Segs is doing everything but painting a big fucking sign on his head that says ASK ME WHY I’M ACTING WEIRD.

Patrice narrows his eyes, jaw set.


Looch beams at him and settles back to watch the movie.
The park is huge.

Johnny wends his way from the parking lot through a tree-lined jogging path, past a sizable fountain, and down a gently sloping hill. Any worries he may have had about finding the Causeway guys dissipate when he hears shouting before he even sees them, rounding a bend as the path opens up onto a neatly manicured soccer field.

“Heads up!”

Johnny barely ducks in time as a soccer ball sails past his ear, kicked by a grinning Marchy.

“Thanks,” he says flatly, collecting the ball and chucking it back in the direction of Marchy’s head. “How’s it going?”

“Eh, can’t complain,” Marchy says. He turns and kicks the soccer ball back across the turf to where Patrice, Malkin, Looch, Krejci, Seguin, and a handful of other guys are clustered. “C’mon, I think we’re going to try playing, if the guys can ever get their shit together.”

Marchy takes off without waiting, Johnny trailing behind with his water bottle swinging in one hand. At the far end of the field, Johnny notices Rask already stalking off toward one of the goals to lurk in the net there, looking incongruously intense. He’s seen the kid throw a full rack of sticks onto the ice after losing a game, and apparently the off-season doesn’t do much to unwind him.

Johnny flops down in the taller grass at the edge of one of the fields, leaning back on his elbows and watching the other guys horse around.

“Come on!” Patrice yells, waving as he runs over, and fending off Thornton, who’s trying to get him in a choke hold. “Pick-up game!”

“Do I have to?” Johnny groans, flopping over in the grass. “I was running when Looch texted this morning to invite me, and I was really looking forward to not moving anymore today.”

Patrice snorts and prods him with the toe of his sneaker. “Yes, you do, because otherwise it’ll be uneven. Stop bitching, drama queen, we both know you have it in you.”

“Give him a break, Berg.” Seguin’s wandered over to stand behind Patrice, arms crossed over his chest. “I’m kinda tired, too. I’ll chill with him and you guys’ll have even sides.”

Patrice looks like he wants to argue, but Marchy yells, “Dudes, c’mon! Time’s a-wasting and I wanna kick your asses already,” so he just shrugs and jogs back over to where they’re dividing into teams.

Seguin shuffles over to where Johnny’s sitting up again, arms around his knees. Johnny squints up at him.

“Can I sit?” Seguin asks, and he’s quiet, young-sounding; still not meeting Johnny’s eyes.

“Oh, yeah, I guess.” Johnny shrugs.

Seguin sits, mimicking Johnny’s position with a comfortable foot of space between them. He’s quiet for a long time. Johnny watches Patrice score on Rask. Marchand tries to even it up a moment or two
later, but gets denied with the ball flung back at his head.

“So um,” Seguin starts, and then licks his lips nervously. “I... wanted to apologize for the other night. I was really drunk.” His gaze is locked straight ahead out at the field and his fingers are tugging distractedly at a few stalks of grass, and the first thing Johnny thinks is how sad he looks. Or maybe just sort of lost.

Johnny suddenly wishes he was out on the field, far away from this conversation. He doesn’t like being wrong, and he’d be much, much more comfortable with this whole situation if Seguin could just go back to being the douchebag caveman Johnny had originally pinned him for.

He sighs, wrestling with himself as the silence stretches between them until he finally asks, “Did you really mean it?”

“Mean it?” Seguin glances up quickly, before resuming his grass-tugging.

Johnny sighs. “Did you really want to kiss me?”

Seguin shrugs, and then nods once, tightly. He seems really interested in his shoelace.

“But,” Johnny stops. He doesn’t think he’s ever tried so hard to pick his words carefully. “But it wasn’t me, right? You just wanted to try kissing a guy and I was... convenient.”

After another couple seconds’ pause, Seguin shrugs again. “I don’t know.”

Johnny wants to say, doesn’t say, how the fuck can you not know, asshole, but instead asks, “Why the hell haven’t you just talked to Bergy or Looch or someone else about this?” He jerks his chin to indicate the field of idiots currently trying to check each other over a soccer ball, and Rask shouting at them, apparently trying to refocus the goal-scoring effort.

“Dunno,” Seguin says. He looks up at Johnny, for the first time now with a hint of the stubborn-asshole vibe back behind his eyes, “I’m not gay. I like chicks, too, okay? I’m just. I dunno. I’ve been thinking about it and I got curious or whatever.”

“What?” Johnny snorts. “Like I care? Like I’m gonna judge? Fuck it, man, do whatever -- whoever - - but just don’t be a dick about it. If you wanna try shit with guys, try shit with guys, but don’t try and make stupid excuses, and maybe try actually talking to people who like you.”

Tyler’s eyes flick over to him and then back down. “Now who’s being a dick?”

“I’m just saying,” Johnny says. He picks a stalk of grass for himself, twirling it between his fingers.

“I’m not some kind of homophobic dickbag,” Seguin says. His voice gets louder and louder, ramping up as he continues, “I know you think I am, but I’m not, okay, this shit’s just kinda new to me. Bergy’s my best friend, but he didn’t tell me for months that he was with Malkin. Like he thought I’d... I dunno. Like I’d flip out, or something.”

Johnny’s not entirely sure if Seguin’s even really talking to him anymore; which one of them he’s trying to convince.

“You did kind of flip out,” Johnny says, mildly. “And you, uh. You say stuff sometimes that makes you sound like a homophobic dickbag, so maybe you could work on that, if you don’t want people getting the wrong impression.”

Seguin glances up, and for a moment, Johnny is convinced he’s about to start yelling. Instead, he just
says, “Yeah, maybe.”

“Maybe,” says Johnny, resisting the urge to roll his eyes.

“Look,” Seguin says, defensively. “It’s not like I have any idea what I’m doing, here.”

“And you think I do?”

“Well, I mean, yeah,” says Seguin, huffily. “You’re you. You did this years ago--”

“I didn’t do this!” Johnny bursts out, laughing in spite of himself at the complete absurdity of the whole situation. “I had no idea what I was doing, I was mostly just trying not to get kicked off the Madison varsity team and it kind of... exploded. It could have gone so much worse, I think I just got lucky.”

“No shit,” Seguin mutters, and Johnny laughs again, wryly.

“It’s not the same,” he says, firmly. Seguin nods.

“Yeah.”

“And I’m not some kind of-- some kind of expert, okay?”

“Okay.”

Johnny smiles a little, and Seguin smiles back.

“You weren’t just convenient, for the record,” he says, blushing pink.

“Oh really?” Johnny raises his eyebrows, holding back a smirk.


“God, I’m glad I turned you down,” Johnny tells him. “You’re really embarrassing.”

Seguin shoves him back, glowering as Johnny flops over in the grass, snickering.

On the field, things have devolved. Rask is swearing prolifically at the top of his lungs as Davy tries to balance on Looch’s shoulders, wrestling with one of the underclassmen Johnny doesn’t know, balanced on Thornton’s shoulders. Patrice abandons the ball mid-dribble, launching himself at Malkin and kissing him. Malkin laughs and tries to push him off, but Patrice just rubs his sweaty t-shirt on him some more, getting in his space until Malkin gives in and slings an arm around him.

From the corner of his eye, Johnny can see Seguin staring at his shoes again. Across the field, Rask is losing his shit.

“I’m gonna go play,” Johnny decides out loud, abruptly, before things can get more awkward.

“Before your goalie loses his mind.”

He hustles off before Seguin has time to respond, stealing the ball from Marchy and kicking it at
Rask as hard as he can as many times as he can until he’s sweaty and panting and back at home in his bones.
July: Geno

“Geno. Geno! You awake, man?”

Geno shakes himself, refocusing on Sid, who’s glaring critically up at him from the bench press.
“Oh! Sorry, yeah.”

Sid raises his eyebrows. “You sure? Because I really don’t feel like dropping barbells on myself
while you space out—”

“I said I’m awake!” Geno bursts out, with more vitriol than he’d really intended. He feels
immediately terrible for the way Sid’s expression flattens, mouth thinning into a frown. “I’m sorry.
Ready to spot now, if you ready.”

“Yeah,” says Sid, still looking miffed. “Okay.”

They don’t speak as Geno spots him, keeping a couple of fingers poised under the bar as Sid lifts it,
and redouble concentration under Coach’s watchful eye as he prowls from station to station in the
loud, sweaty little weight room. It’s not crowded, with only the handful of guys who live close
enough to school to still be around for the summer, but the heat from outside combined with the
clanging of weights create a stuffy, claustrophobic atmosphere.

“You’d think,” Nealer mutters, as he and Martin wander over to swap stations with Sid and Geno a
few minutes later, “that between all the rich alums and the boosters, this school would find a way to
build us an actual gym. Or maybe even just a room built after the invention of air conditioning to
keep all this antique equipment in.”

Martin laughs, but Sid rolls his eyes. “I’m pretty sure nearly all of last year’s budget went to
replacing the coils under the rink, and fixing the zamboni. I think having usable ice is kind of the
priority.”

“How do you even know that kind of crap?” Neal asks him, fiddling absently with a barbell clip as
he readjusts the weights.

“I read the school newsletter,” Sid says, drily. “It’s not hard.”

“Hey, G, you alright?” Martin asks, distracting from Nealer’s retort to Sid. “You look kinda out of
it.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Geno lies, attempting what he hopes is a disarming smile. He’s been doing so well
for over a month, not dragging his team into his personal crap, but that’s really only because he’d
assumed it would all be sorted out by now. As time moves on, however, more and more he’s
wondering how fucking deluded he’d actually been to think that way.

It’s mid-July, and he’s still living with the Bergerons. He still hasn’t spoken to his family. He’s half-
written dozens of texts to Denis that he’s never sent, feeling sick to his stomach every time he just
gave up and deleted whatever he’d come up with. He has a stack of job applications sitting on the
desk in his borrowed room at Patrice’s house, but every time he sits down to start filling them out,
that same sick, swooping feeling in his gut overtakes him, and he thinks about mornings making
pastry and filling catering orders for his mother. Thinks about Denis sitting on the stool next to him
and helping, singing along with American pop songs together and drinking cups of Russian tea so
strong that their mother yells at them both for bouncing off the walls for the rest of the day.
Geno has been putting off dealing with any of it, becoming increasingly aware that he has no money, no car, no family, and no idea what to do come the end of August, when the new school year starts. The Bergerons have been overwhelmingly accommodating, but Geno doesn’t expect them to house him until he goes off to college -- yet another subject that causes jolts of panic every time he thinks about it. If he can’t afford his own place to live now, there’s no way he’s going to be able to afford college next fall.

Possibly worst of all is the way that Patrice seems to be avoiding talking about any of this with him. Not that Geno really expects him to, but it still sucks, the two of them constantly mincing around anything to do with Geno’s current situation. It feels like being coddled, or worse, like Patrice thinks he’s some kind of time bomb just waiting to go off.

“He’s been weird all morning,” Sid says, bringing Geno out of his thoughts with an uncomfortable jolt.

“Are you having, you know,” Martin lowers his voice, “guy trouble?”

Neal bursts out laughing and Sid chokes on a mouthful of Gatorade. Martin goes bright red.

“No,” says Geno, cheeks going hot. “No, we fine.”

“So you’re still crashing at his place?” Neal interjects. “How the hell did you manage that, dude? Do your guys’s parents not know? Do they just think--”

“Jimmy, shut the fuck up,” Martin says, cutting him off. Neal shoots him a hurt look.

“I’m just saying--”

“And I’m just telling you to shut up, so we can stop dicking around and get through this workout before dinner time.”

Sid herds Geno off toward the squat station, leaving Martin and Neal to bicker. He looks worried, maybe even a little scared, casting undisguised sidelong glances that Geno can see from the corner of his eye as they get set up.

“What?” he demands, finally, when he catches Sid at it again.

Sid’s cheeks go pink, but he meets Geno’s eyes defiantly. “What, what?”

“You keep looking at me.” The same way Patrice has been looking at him, although Sid doesn’t need to know that. Sid also doesn’t need to know how much Geno would rather have this out with him, instead of Patrice.

Sid’s expression doesn’t waver. “Well yeah, dude. I’m supposed to be spotting you. It’d be bad if I wasn’t looking.”

“You know that’s not what I meant,” Geno snaps, impatiently.

“Then what did you mean?” Sid retorts. “Because I’m starting to get really sick of trying to translate your weirdass mood swings.”

They both stand and glare at each other, until Geno’s temper starts to ebb, as quickly as it had risen.

“Sorry,” he says, sagging.

If anything, this only makes Sid look more concerned. “It’s fine,” he says, stoically. “Just, let’s finish
these sets, okay? Paulie’s right, I don’t want to spend all day in here.”

There’s a distinct implication of *we’ll finish this talk later* that Geno has learned to recognize from people like Flower and Patrice, but which sounds alien and disorienting coming from Sid. Paired with Sid’s trademarked stubborn stoicism, it’s annoyingly effective.

They leave the stuffy gym an hour later, emerging sweaty and disheveled into an even hotter afternoon.

“God, this is disgusting,” Sid says, tugging his t-shirt to unstick it from his sweaty back. “Wanna go somewhere super air conditioned for lunch?”

It’s too hot for Geno to even bother arguing the blatant ploy to finish their earlier conversation.

“You have car?”

Sid nods.

“Okay, I text Patrice and tell him I don’t need ride home.”

They follow a covered walkway to the small back parking lot behind the rink, and Geno doesn’t pay any mind to the aging Ford Explorer idling at the curb until it honks, making both of them jump. He double-takes, before rounding on Sid.

“You told Alex to come?” he hisses, even as the SUV engine cuts off, and the driver’s side door opens.

“Ovechkin? No, I haven’t talked to him since before school got out,” Sid says, sounding surprised enough that Geno actually believes him. “Why is he here?”

He’s already wearing a familiar expression somewhere between haughty and petulant, that any other day Geno would find hilarious. Today, though, he’s in no mood to deal with their weird little decade-long turf war over him.

“He’s here because you’re not answering texts,” Alex says, affording Sid a quietly appraising look before rounding on Geno. “What the fuck, Malkin! Your dad kicked you out a month ago for dating Patrice fucking Bergeron, who you’ve been living with this whole time, and I get to hear about it just now from your brother?”

His accent gets thicker the more he gets worked up, Sid actually taking a step back. Geno holds his ground, however, arms crossed over his chest and trying not to let his tone give him away when he asks, “You talk to Denis?”

“Yeah,” says Alex, eyes narrowing beadily. “He came by this morning to drop some stuff off from your mom and was acting all weird. I practically had to shake him down before he’d talk, but then he tell me–”

“What?” Geno cuts in, before he can stop himself. “What he say happen?”

Alex rolls his eyes. “I just told you what he said. He told me your dad kicked you out because you’re hooking up with Bergeron–”

“Not ‘hooking up’,” Geno interrupts, venomously.

“That you’re *together,*” Alex corrects loudly, with another eyeroll. “God, whatever. You know what
I mean. Your dad found out, he lost shit, and now you’re living with the Bergerons and not answering your phone.”

“I change number,” Geno says, tersely. “Had to get new pre-pay phone.”

In his periphery, Geno can see Sid’s mouth go thin again, but he doesn’t speak up. Alex, however, says, “Denis also say you’re not working with him and your mama anymore. No money for phone?”

Geno juts his chin out defiantly. “I doing fine.”

“Liar,” says Sid, quietly, and then looks mortified when both Geno and Alex turn to look at him. “I mean,” he amends quickly, “you’ve just seemed really worried lately.”

“No shit,” says Alex, looking back to Geno.

Under any other circumstances, Geno would be heckling them both for momentarily agreeing on something. Instead, he just glares.

“This family business, Ovi.”

Alex glares right back. “Yeah, and we’re as good as family, I always think. Maybe I’m thinking wrong, though, if you don’t tell me about something this big. I thought we establish last time when you tell me about dating a guy that you can trust me.”

He looks almost hurt saying this; the hard, challenging expression fading into something that Geno is even less equipped to handle.

“It was more complicated,” he says, truthfully, willing Alex to understand, and wishing Sid weren’t here to witness this. “ Didn’t want to drag you in.”

“He knows, though,” Alex says, nodding toward Sid. “Right? You tell him, but not me.”

“I didn’t know,” Sid cuts in, quickly. He looks like he’d rather be just about anywhere else. “Not really, anyway. Geno didn’t really say anything, except that he’s staying with Bergeron, but I, uh. I kinda guessed the rest,” he finishes quietly, not looking at Geno. Geno doesn’t blame him.

“Oh,” says Alex. He looks suddenly at a loss. “Then, did you actually tell anybody at all?”

Geno shrugs. “Patrice.”

“Duh,” says Alex. Sid almost smiles, but catches himself.

“I mean it, though,” Geno says, before either of them can derail his sense of purpose even further. This is what he’d been afraid of, if his friends found out the details -- both that they’d want to help, and, even worse, that he’d want to let them. Even now, it’s all he can do to keep himself from caving in and begging them to try and figure everything out for him. “Alex, this why I didn’t call. Don’t want you getting caught in middle, get in trouble with your parents for--”

“For what?” Alex demands, with a derisive snort. “For not disowning you? I don’t even know if your parents have told them anything, but anyway, it’s not like I’m dating dudes.”

He stares Geno down, challenging him to argue, but Geno doesn’t have it in him.

“How’s Denis?” he asks, finally.

“Fine,” says Alex. “Worried about you. You might want to call or text him once in awhile.”
Geno sighs. “I don’t want to get him into trouble, either.”

“Oh, please.” Alex waves this statement off. “Your brother has the good sense not to go blabbing your parents if you’re talking to him. I’m beginning to think that kid got all the brains between you two.”

“Does he want to talk to me?” Geno feels almost afraid to ask, ignoring the jab about his intelligence in favor of quelling the mix of anxiety and hope inflating like a balloon between his ribs.

“Of course,” says Alex. “And he’d probably be really pissed if he knew you were even wondering about that. He seemed really pissed at your dad, and,” he pauses, considering, “I think he’s worried you’re angry with him.”

“Why would I be angry at Denis?” Geno asks, nonplussed. Alex shrugs.

“You tell me. Or, better yet, call your brother and find out directly from him!”


“Chickenshit,” says Alex. “I have to get back to work now, so I’m going to leave trusting that you make good choices.”

“Yeah,” says Geno, quietly.

“And that you call me once in awhile. Actually, give me new number now, so no more avoiding.”

“Fine,” Geno says, but he has to hide a smile as he digs his new cheap little flip phone out of the pocket of his shorts. “I text you, then you have number.”

“Hey,” says Sid, speaking up at last from where he’s settled down to sit on the curb behind them. “Ovi, how did you even know we’d be here right now?”

Alex eyes him smugly. “I go on Consol website and look at hockey team page. Very easy to navigate. It has your whole summer training schedule, and I know it would take more than a little family drama to keep Evgeni Malkin from his training.”

“A little family drama,” Geno echoes, rolling his eyes.

“You know what I mean,” Alex says. He makes a show of adding Geno’s new number to his contacts before swinging himself back into the driver’s seat of the Explorer. “I’ll text you soon and we’ll hang out. You, me, and Bergeron,” he adds, pointedly. “I want to meet the face who launched a thousand ships.”

“Glad you keeping up with summer reading,” Geno calls, over the sound of the Explorer’s engine rumbling to life. “You keep up with reading, I keep up with training, we look forward to play wimpy bookworm team in October.”

Sid snickers as Alex gives them both the finger before waving cheerfully and driving off.

“So,” says Sid, when he’s gone.

Geno says, “So.”

Sid looks at him appraisingly for a long moment. “You want to go get that lunch?”
July: Patrice

Patrice is sitting at the breakfast bar when he hears the front door open and shut, tooling around on his laptop and drinking a can of Coke Zero through a straw. Mostly, he just likes having something to chew on while he stares at the screen.

“You’re back,” he says, when Geno wanders into the kitchen. “How was it?”

“Weight room today. Was gross, need new air conditioner.”

“Ew.” Patrice fiddles with his straw.

“Yeah,” says Geno. He makes a face when Patrice offers to share the Coke, eyeing the straw with distaste before going to get his own can from the fridge. Patrice grins, and resumes chewing on his straw. “How was skating?”

“We did power skate today, so hard, mostly,” says Patrice, shrugging. “But it’s still nice to be on the ice when it’s this gross outside like this.”

Geno nods, perching on the stool next to Patrice and leaning in so their shoulders bump. Patrice feels a warmth that has nothing to do with the weather spread through him, and he leans into the contact.

“Sid give you a ride home?”

Geno hums in affirmative. “Yeah. We went to lunch, I take him to that diner you bring me to before.”

“Cool,” says Patrice. “How’s he doing?”

“Fine. He being Sid, like usual.”

Patrice laughs. “How does that work for him, when there isn’t anything to be intense and weird about all summer?”

“He find ways to stay busy,” says Geno, but there’s no humor in his tone, and he seems very interested in the pull-tab on his can.

“You okay?” Patrice reaches out, giving Geno’s arm a poke. “You seem off.”

“Alex show up after training,” Geno says, without preamble.

Patrice has to think a moment. “Alex, like, Alex Ovechkin from Capital?”

“We know other Alex?”

“Well, no,” Patrice says, hesitantly. “What was he doing there?”

Geno seems to chew his words over before he speaks. “He come to see me. See my brother when he do restaurant delivery or something, and find out about me and family.”

“Oh,” says Patrice, eyes going wide. “Oh. What’d he say?”

“Tell me to call Denis,” Geno says, tersely. The warmth that Patrice had felt moments before ebbs and gives way to an all too familiar swoop of anxious worry. “He’s right, too. I’ve been avoiding.”
“That’s not true!” Patrice says, vehemently. His can of Coke sloshes across the granite countertop as he sets it down harder than he’d meant to. “You’ve just been--”

“Avoiding,” Geno says again, and the look he gives Patrice saves Patrice from trying to figure out how to finish his thought.

“You’ve had enough to deal with,” he says, instead, and can’t help feeling a little irritated with the way Geno brushes this off with a derisive snort. “Well, I mean, you have.”

“That not mattering,” Geno says, his voice rising, and Patrice has to will himself not to flinch back. “I spend so much time in last few weeks trying not to think about what I’m doing to family, to friends, and team and--”

“What about what your family did to you?” Patrice demands, and a part of him wants to shake Geno for making Patrice defend him to himself like this, after everything Geno’s told him about his father. “What about how they kicked you out and basically disowned you?”

“That was just my dad,” Geno says, stubbornly. “I should have tried to talk to Denis, or even Mama. I tell Alex months ago I’d talk to him more, but I avoid him, too, because so close to family.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sorry if I don’t disagree with your concern there,” Patrice says, glaring defiantly back when Geno gives him a look.

“Alex is okay. He cool when I tell him I’m dating boy. Now he say he cool that boy is you, and he not taking side with parents. I should have trusted him more.”

“Yeah, well,” Patrice mutters, darkly, “he’d better be cool with it.”

“Me and Alex friends for years,” says Geno, and there’s undisguised warning in his tone.

“And I’m not disregarding that, obviously,” says Patrice, his hackles rising as they glare at each other. “But your family also doesn’t have the best record with me, these days. I don’t like how they treat you, and I can’t believe I’m actually arguing about this with you right now, after how fucked up everything’s been!”

“That because you don’t understand!” Geno practically shouts, exasperated enough to slide off his stool and stand, rocking foot to foot in agitation. “Your parents are nice, and open-minded. They listen and support, you don’t have to worry what they think. I was raised to respect what my parents say, and not question, or contradict. I’m not sorry,” he adds, in response to Patrice’s expression, “that I did what I did. But that not mean I don’t still feel shitty about it, for hurting Mama and Denis and keeping secrets from friends and team.”

Patrice hates himself for the hot prickling of tears that threaten to betray him, blinking them back and trying to keep his expression steady.

“So then,” he says, voice small, “are you thinking about going home?”

Geno gives him a frustrated look. “No, of course not. But need to try harder, and try to make things better. Call Denis, find job, find place to live for school year.”

Something altogether petty and selfish sinks like a stone in Patrice’s belly. He avoids Geno’s eyes when he says, “It’s nice having you here. Maybe…” What? Maybe Geno can move in permanently until graduation? His parents may be patient and supportive, Geno’s right about that, but he’s not sure how far they could push their luck. He trails off, once again unsure of how to finish his thought.
“I know,” says Geno, and for the first time since walking in, his expression softens. “But this your home. I’m guest here. Don’t want to overstay welcome.”

“You won’t,” Patrice insists. It feels wrong to argue more; coercive and clingy and ultimately pointless. Instead, he asks, “Where would you go? Would you finish at Consol?”

“Yeah,” Geno says. “Actually, was thinking maybe I re-apply for original scholarship they offer in Freshman year. Full ride with boarding, but I never take because easier to stay home when I work for Mama.”

“Oh.”

The truth is, Patrice has gotten used to having Geno around. He’s taken for granted how easy it is, to just come home and hang out together all the time. And if he’s being really honest, he knows that it’s not fair to assume this could go on indefinitely. His family is not Geno’s family, and his friends are his friends first.

Patrice’s phone chooses exactly that moment to start buzzing in his pocket.

“It’s Segs,” he says, stupidly, staring at the screen.

“Maybe you should answer?”

Patrice looks from the phone to Geno, and back again. “But we were in the middle of--”

“Is fine,” Geno insists. “I’ll be upstairs. Come find me when done.”

Patrice hesitates another second, and then hits answer.

“Hello?”

“Hey,” says Segs. “Bad time?”

“Not really,” Patrice says. “What’s going on?”

Segs hesitates. “I just had something I wanted to, um…To talk to you about, I guess. It’s not that big a deal. You sound weird. You sure you’re okay?”

On the one hand, Segs has been pretty consistently unenthused about the addition of Geno in Patrice’s life. On the other, Patrice doesn’t currently give a crap.

“Geno just came home,” he says, in a rush. “And I think he’s kind of freaking out, because he’s been avoiding the whole thing with his family, and what’s gonna happen, and now I’m freaking out, because…Because I don’t even really know why, except for how I never fucking know what to say to him, when this stuff comes up, it all just seems wrong, and there’s nothing I can do, Ty. I hate it! I feel completely fucking helpless, and also like it’s totally my fault, since they kicked him out because he’s dating me.”

“They kicked him out?”

“Yeah,” Patrice says, feeling embarrassed. “I guess I kind of figured people knew, or assumed, or whatever.”

“Honestly, I didn’t know what to think,” Segs says. There’s a dry edge to his voice that Patrice isn’t a huge fan of. “And since you didn’t really seem like you wanted to trust us--”
“Of course I trust you,” Patrice snaps, before he can help himself. “Dude, come on. But I promised Geno I wouldn’t spread it around.”

“Since when is talking to me and Marchy spreading it around,” Segs demands.

Patrice laughs incredulously. “You guys are the biggest gossips I know!”

“Okay, okay,” Segs concedes. “But most of that’s Marchy.”

“Right.”

“Fuck you,” says Segs. “So why’s he freaking out?”

“Everything, I guess,” Patrice says, swiveling on his stool to kick his toes against the breakfast bar. “He wants to find work, and I guess now he’s going to try and get this live-in scholarship to board at Consol for Senior year.”

“No kidding. I mean, he’s been staying with you guys a while already, right? You must be getting kind of sick of each other by now,” Segs says, and Patrice wants to shout, This right here is why I didn’t tell you anything! But he doesn’t.

Instead, he says, “We’re not, though! Or, I mean, I’m not.” He hesitates, biting his lip and trying not to think too hard. “I just suck at this whole thing where I can’t do shit to help out, and everything I try to do just seems to fuck things up worse. This is partially my responsibility and I--”

“How the hell is it your responsibility, though?” Segs cuts him off, and he sounds almost angry.

Patrice says, “What?”

“I mean,” says Segs, “did you tell him to leave home? Did you give him some kind of, like, ultimatum, or something?”

“No,” says Patrice. “Of course not! I would nev--”

“Then maybe this is less about it being your responsibility, and more about it just being something that isn’t all about you.”

“Excuse me?”

Panic and confusion are replaced almost instantaneously by seething rage, and Patrice has to fight the urge to just hang up on Segs before anything else can happen.

“You heard me,” Segs says, and while Patrice’s brain is clamoring with anger, Segs sounds deadly calm. “You’ve always sucked at dealing with stuff you can’t control, that isn’t all about you, and your precious little life. Did it ever occur to you that shit happens to other people that has nothing to do with you, but they might still need you to just be there or whatever? Probably not, since apparently the only stuff you pay attention to is whatever’s most important to you, and everyone else’s shit is just secondary.”

“Hey,” Patrice shouts, finally cutting in over Segs’ diatribe. “Hey, fuck you! You have no idea--”

“You have no idea!” Segs shouts back, calm finally broken and voice shaking. Patrice has only heard him this upset maybe once or twice in his entire life, and it’s never been directed at him. “I’ve been trying to talk to you for weeks, dude, but it’s like you’ve disappeared, and every time I try you throw some shit back in my face like how you’ve got more important stuff to deal with than me, now, and I
need to wait my fucking turn.”

Patrice grits his teeth, hands shaking. “I never said anything like that.”

“You didn’t have to,” Segs retorts, and there’s an air of finality in his voice.

“I’m sorry you’re jealous,” Patrice says, and immediately regrets it, even if he can’t seem to stop himself from barrelling on. “I’m sorry you’re so fucking insecure that you can’t deal with me paying attention to anyone besides you.”

Something snaps, Patrice thinks he can almost hear it in the silence that rings in the dead air between them.

“Yeah,” says Segs, at last. “Yeah, that must be it.”

Patrice snorts, hesitating a moment before hanging up without another word.

He stands in the kitchen clutching his phone, unaware of when he got off the stool, and unable to focus on anything besides the hammering of his heart in his chest, and the ringing in his ears.
“Mail for you.” Johnny’s dad drops a tan envelope next to his plate on his way through the kitchen to the fridge.

Johnny doesn’t bother looking up from the issue of *Sports Illustrated* he’s thumbing through. “Thanks.”

“Aren’t you going to open it? Looks like it’s from Madison Tech.”

“It’s probably just my report card,” Johnny says, glancing at the envelope with his school seal emblazoned on the front. “Is there any more iced tea?”

His dad refills Johnny’s glass and then pours one for himself, settling down into the chair opposite. “You worried about your grades?”

“No, not really.”

“You sure?”

Johnny shrugs.

His dad sighs. “Kid, I know you aren’t enthusiastic about sharing your thoughts with your mom and I lately, and I’ve been doing my best to give you some space, but if there’s anything we need to know…” He trails off, and Johnny feels a twist of guilt at the hint of a pleading tone in his dad’s voice.

“There isn’t, I swear,” Johnny says, setting his magazine down and reaching for his glass. “I’m just honestly not super concerned. I know I did pretty well on all my finals. Here.”

He tears open the envelope, glancing at the sheet of heavy paper that falls out before handing it over. His dad takes it, glancing down the page before handing it back, eyebrows raised.

“Straight A’s.”

“I told you I wasn’t super concerned.” Johnny has to work to keep the smirk out of his expression, but by the quirk of his dad’s lips, he can tell he’s not doing a very good job.

“I should’ve known better than to doubt,” says his dad. He grins, reaching across the table to clap Johnny on the shoulder. “I know things started out a little rocky, the way it ended with Pat, but you really pulled it together. I’m so proud of you, kiddo. Wait’ll we tell your mom!”

Johnny cringes. “Do we have to?”

“Do we have to tell your mother that you got straight A’s?” His dad’s buoyant expression fades as quickly as it came. “Yeah, I think it’d be pretty weird not to, don’t you think? Anyway, she deserves the opportunity to be happy for you, Jon. Maybe we could all go out for dinner tonight to celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”
Johnny hadn’t even heard his mother come in from gardening, floppy wide-brimmed hat pushed back off of her sweaty forehead and a dark smudge of potting soil across her cheek.

“Celebrate what?” she asks again, but before either of them can answer, her sharp eyes catch sight of the envelope and its school seal. “Grades?”

Johnny nods, handing over the report card with a feeling of mute resignation.

“Oh, Jon,” she says, looking it over and breaking into a wide, beaming smile. “This is wonderful! Do you have any idea what this is going to mean for your college prospects? Even advanced placement for your senior year, or maybe an internship—”

“Mom,” Johnny cuts her off, snatching the card back from her and stuffing it unceremoniously back into its envelope. “Mom, it’s not that big a deal, okay? I don’t want this to turn into some big thing.”

(Some big thing,) she echoes, incredulously, while across the table Johnny can see his dad attempting to give her a quelling look. She ignores it completely. “But this is a big thing! This is an enormous opportunity, Johnny. I know you’ve had a rough year, but college acceptance is getting more and more competitive, and you can’t afford not to use every edge you’ve got.”

“A 4.0 GPA isn’t exactly a huge edge, Mom,” Johnny says, uselessly, under the scathing look she gives him. “I mean, plenty of kids—”

“Plenty of kids do not get a 4.0 GPA while participating in the kinds of rigorous extra-curricular activities that you do,” she says firmly.

He meets her eyes levelly. “Extracurriculars? So I guess it’s great that hockey’s done so much for my qualifications, but somehow it’s still not worth using to look into college programs?”

“Jon,” his dad says, warningly. He’s stayed quiet until now, watching the two of them with a guarded expression.

Johnny snorts. “Dad, come on, you know I’m right! She’s totally fine with hockey, so long as it doesn’t threaten my living up to whatever arbitrary expectations she has for my future.”

“This has nothing to do with being right,” his dad says, as his mother swells with indignation.

“Johnny, don’t be ridiculous,” she says, snatching the crumpled envelope from his grasp and smoothing it fastidiously between her fingers. “I just think you’re capable of so much more than just excelling at sports, don’t you see that? How could you not, after a report card like this! You’re smart, you’re driven, you’re a natural-born leader. I just want you to explore all of your options, before you settle—”

“Hockey isn’t settling!” Johnny bursts out, finally standing to face her. He’s taller than she is, by several inches already, but he doesn’t think he’ll ever get past feeling about half her size when they go head to head like this. “It’s what makes me happy, Mom. Why the hell can’t you get that?”

“Oh, trust me,” Johnny says, acidly. “I’m aware.”

“I’m not even defending the idea that you and Patrick broke up,” he says, finally making his way to his feet. “I’m just saying I got no agenda for you and Patrick breaking up. I am tired of defending
myself to you over that, and tired of being punished for it.”

Johnny bristles. “It’s Patrick, it’s hockey, it’s any goddamn thing that doesn’t live up to your standards for me, and it’s exhausting,” he shouts. He isn’t aware of his dad getting up until there’s a hand on his arm.

“Jon. Johnny, hey, let’s all take a timeout, okay? Your mom’s just—”

“She’s trying to make sure I turn out just like her,” Johnny says. “Safe, boring degree, and a safe, boring corporate job.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his mother says. She drops the report card onto a stack of mail perched on the edge of the counter, and starts filling the kettle for tea. “I am not having this argument with you again, Jonathan. You may not agree with it, but I’m your mother, I love you, and it’s up to us as your parents to help you plan ahead.”

“Dad,” Johnny says, pleadingly, “Dad, this isn’t fair. It would be stupid not to look into college hockey, if I could get a scholarship from it, right?”

Johnny’s dad glances at his mom, hesitating. “It could be another solid option.”

“And it could completely distract him from serious studies,” his mother says, brusquely. “We talked about this. It’s too big a risk. What if he got an injury and couldn’t play? Or what if he decided he didn’t like it? An academic scholarship is just a smarter option, period.”

“And what if a meteor fell out of the sky tomorrow and killed us all,” Johnny grumbles morosely, refusing to back down under the scathing look his mother gives him. “I’m right here, you know. I can hear you. And you’re the one being ridiculous, if you think there isn’t plenty of risk, regardless of what option I take. We wouldn’t even be having this conversation if you weren’t just pissed off that I won’t shut up and do as I’m told.”

“Timeout,” his dad says, warningly. He doesn’t raise his voice, but he doesn’t have to. “Now, Jon. I may have been suggesting before, but I’m telling you, now. Go up to your room and take some space, we’ll let you know when it’s time for dinner.”

Johnny glares, but his father just looks levelly back, and finally Johnny turns without another word and stomps upstairs to his room, slamming the door behind him. It’s stupid, the whole situation is stupid, and even with his mind racing, he can’t think of a single way to make them see sense. Not with their heads so far up their asses, anyway, he thinks sullenly to himself.

He’s not good at feeling helpless. Johnny’s never been good at handling a situation he can’t fix as soon as possible. In the end, he lies on his unmade bed and watches shadows lengthen across the room until he falls asleep. He doesn’t come down for dinner, even when his dad knocks.

--

Johnny wakes up the next morning, Monday, feeling sick, heavy, and hungry. It’s a moment before he remembers why, groaning in renewed frustration and rolling back over to bury his face in his pillow.

Minutes, or possibly hours later, he’s woken again by the persistent buzzing of his phone on the nightstand. The caller ID reads Carbomb.

“What the fuck, Dan,” Johnny says by way of greeting. Carbomb snorts.
“What the fuck, yourself. Were you sleeping?”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, grumpily. “Is that okay with you?”


“Rough night,” Johnny mutters. “My parents are irritating the shit out of me.”

“Ah,” says Carbomb, but he doesn’t inquire further, and Johnny is equal parts grateful for this, and guilty for snapping in the first place. “Does that mean you can’t go out tonight?”

“Hell no,” Johnny says, emphatically. “What time? They both get home around seven, so I could just leave them a note.”

Johnny can almost hear Carbomb’s eyebrows go up. “They’d be cool with that? Even after your little stint as a runaway a few months ago?”

“Fuck right off,” Johnny tells him, and Carbomb snickers. “I keep telling you, I didn’t run away. They knew where I was basically the whole time.”

“That just means you were a half-assed runaway,” Carbomb says. “Still counts. But do you wanna argue about this shit, or do you wanna hear about this thing we’re doing tonight?”

Johnny swallows his retort, sighing. “Tell me.”

“Oh, so it’s this basement show--”

“Shut the fuck up, smartass,” Carbomb says, over Johnny’s grumbling. “It’s in this really cool little annex space off a venue over on the west side of town, and this dude is playing who I’ve been wanting to see for ages, but he almost never tours.”

“This dude?” Johnny asks, skeptically. “Anyone I’ve heard of?”

“No,” says Carbomb, comfortably, “but you like really shitty music, so that’s not surprising.”

“And you’re a bag of dicks.”

“I’m okay with it,” Carbomb agrees. “I’ll pick you up at 6:30, okay? And make sure you actually leave a note. I’m eighteen, and I don’t need to start racking up kidnapping charges already.”

Johnny snorts. “Already?”

“You know what I mean.”

After they hang up, Johnny goes to take a shower. When he gets back, there’s a text message from a number he doesn’t recognize.

Hey, this is Seguin. Got ur # from Looch.

Johnny regards the message for a long moment before finally texting back, Oookay. What’s up?

It’s nearly fifteen minutes before the reply comes, chiming from his back pocket as Johnny putters around making peanut butter toast.
Wanted to see if you felt like hanging out.

Johnny isn’t sure if he wants to laugh or roll his eyes, so he does both, feeling a little nuts cracking up alone in the quiet kitchen.

Sure, he types, after some consideration. Why not. Wanna invite Bergy and Looch?

No thanks, Seguin replies, which seems to Johny like kind of a weird thing to say, but whatever. He’s still not going anywhere solo with this kid.

K. You can come with me to this thing Carcillo’s taking me to tonight, if you want.

He’s more than a little surprised when Seguin texts back, OK cool. Where at?

Meet at my house at 6:30. Johnny texts him the address, taking his peanut butter toast into the den and flipping on the TV.

As promised, he leaves a note for his parents.

Actually, it’s a pretty detailed note, including a projected time of return, the name of the venue, and an ambiguous, “Sorry.” at the end, that he tries not to think too hard about as he tugs on fresh pants at a quarter to six.

Johnny’s halfway expecting Seguin to bail, and has every intention of leaving without him without a second thought if he hasn’t arrived by the time Carbomb shows up. However, at six twenty-five sharp a dark gray SUV rolls to a stop in front of his house, and Seguin gets out. He looks awkward, nervous, and somehow this calms Johnny’s own nerves.

“Hi,” says Johnny, coming down the walk to meet him. “You found it.”

“Yeah,” says Seguin.

They stand there silently until Johnny says, “Carbomb’ll be here any minute.”

“Okay,” Seguin says. “Cool. He’s okay with me coming?”

“I haven’t told him yet,” Johnny says, grinning. “But he will be, don’t worry.”

“Okay,” Seguin says again, but he sounds less sure.

“So what’s the occasion?” Johnny asks, trying hard to sound nonchalant.

“Occasion?”

Johnny rolls his eyes. “For you to text me. What’d Looch even say, when you asked for my number?”

Seguin laughs nervously. “Nothing, since I got it off his phone while he was in the bathroom.” He glances at Johnny, smirking a little.

“No shit.” Johnny isn’t sure what to say to this, but Seguin saves him the trouble.

“It’s weird, I know. But look, I tried talking to Bergeron again, I swear, and he completely flipped out, and I just… Shit, man. I’m not trying to drag you into anything, but I just need a break from those guys for a minute.”
Johnny regards him skeptically for a moment, and finally shrugs. “Sure, whatever. But keep the drama between you guys. I’ve got enough shit to deal with.”

“Believe me,” Seguin says, “that’s totally fine. I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Good,” says Johnny. “Our ride’s here, anyway.”

Carbomb pulls to a stop behind Seguin’s car, rolling down the passenger window and peering out at them.

“Who’s this?”

“Tyler Seguin,” Johnny says, opening the door and folding down the front seat so Seguin can climb into the back. “From Causeway.”

Carbomb raises his eyebrows, glancing into the back seat. If Johnny didn’t know better, he might be fooled by the haughty look Seguin gives him in return. Carbomb doesn’t seem to buy the false bravado act, either, leering.

“Ah yeah, I remember, now. I just didn’t recognize him without that douchey jersey. What’s up, man?”

He holds up a fist, which Seguin bumps, before settling back into his seat. Johnny slides into the front and shuts the door.

“You took a double minor in our first matchup this season for giving me a nosebleed with your stick,” Seguin says. “My guys scored twice on that power play. Yeah, I remember, too.”

“Any friend of Cap’s,” Dan says, jerking his head at Johnny, who swats at the top of his head.

The ride is spent bickering amicably. Seguin apparently has similar taste in music to Johnny, which Carbomb seems to take personal offense to, and by the time they arrive at the club, or rather, the annex of a club, where the show is scheduled, he’s warningly promised to make Seguin three mixes of what he refers to as “real music”.

“You cool?” Seguin asks, matching pace with Johnny as they follow Carbomb to the doors.


“You seemed a little quiet,” Seguin says, shrugging.

“I’m usually a little quiet,” says Johnny.

“Okay,” says Seguin. “Hey, want me to get your cover? I mean, as a thank you for inviting me, or whatever.”

“You kind of invited yourself,” Johnny says, and immediately feels like a dick, with the way Seguin’s face falls. “No, no, sorry, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You sure?” Seguin asks, and Johnny has the same impression of a confused, defensive kid he’d gotten back at the soccer field.

He still has no idea what to do with it, so he just says, “Yeah, I’m sure. If you wanna pay my cover, that’s really nice of you. Thanks.”

Seguin tugs some bills out of his wallet and hands them over to the big guy manning the entrance,
who stamps the back of their hands and waves them through.

“Guys, look,” Carbomb says, when they catch up to him. He thrusts his hand out at them. “Check it out.”

The stamp on the back of his hand is of a mermaid with enormous boobs. He opens and closes his fist, wiggling his fingers so it looks like she’s moving.

“We all got the same stamp, dude,” Seguin says, holding his out to illustrate. “All it means is we’re under eighteen, and nobody’s gonna let us drink or do anything fun.”

“Or, we could look on the bright side,” says Carbomb, “which is how we’ll be sober enough to truly appreciate this magnificent mermaid rack.”

“I know that’s why I go out looking for fun on Monday nights,” Johnny mutters, low enough so that Carbomb, already leading them down the narrow corridor to the venue, doesn’t hear. Pressed close to his side in the tight space, Seguin snickers.

There isn’t exactly a crowd for the show, which is fortunate, seeing as Johnny estimates this place as being maybe the size of two and a half coat closets. There’s a small platform in one corner, cluttered with a mic, amp, keyboard, two different sets of bongos, a tambourine, and an enormous tangle of wires and cords attached to what looks like some pedals and dials on the floor.

Seguin looks at the platform, then at Johnny, and raises his eyebrows.

Johnny says, “Huh.”

Carbomb thumps him on the shoulder and says, “Keep an open mind, asshole. I’m gonna go get a Coke, either of you want anything?”

Seguin says, “I’m good, thanks,” but Johnny asks for a Coke, too, and Carbomb wends his way between the scattered people in twos and threes, disappearing back down the corridor toward the main bar.

“So,” says Johnny. “Probably not what you had in mind for a night out, huh? Sorry.”

Seguin laughs. He tips his head back as he does it, and Johnny is struck off guard by the clean lines of him. His pale throat, even paler in the dim light, that leaves Johnny with an entirely unnecessary urge to just tilt forward on his toes, so close already, it would be so easy to press his lips there.

What the fuck.

“Dude, it’s fine,” Seguin says, snapping Johnny back to reality so quick that he rocks back on his heels, away from any questionable ideas. “I’m just happy to get out.”

Johnny says, “Yeah,” and he can’t help the smile that breaks over his face at the word. “Yeah, man, me too.”

Seguin grins, and Johnny grins back, in spite of himself. Seguin’s eyes are dark, black in the low light, and his smile is a wolfish flash of teeth, corners of his mouth curling up like there’s some part of the joke only he really gets.

“What’d I miss?”

Carbomb’s voice seems to jolt both of them out of their moment, and Johnny nearly jumps as an icy,
A wet can of Coke is shoved into his hand.

“Not a lot,” he says, quickly. A little too quickly, maybe, because Seguin snorts a laugh behind him. “So uh, what kind of music is this gonna be?”

“It’s more of, like,” Carbomb pauses, clearly searching for the right words, “not quite performance art, but it’s mostly a lot of found sound and looping, and I think he’s supposed to be debuting some of his new original poetry.”

“Oh,” says Johnny, for lack of anything better. He tries to put as much open mindedness into the word as possible, but Carbomb still gives him a steely look.

“Haters to the left,” Carbomb informs him. “Maybe you’ll accidentally get acculturated.”

“Dan aced the verbal part of the SATs,” Johnny informs Seguin, who grins again. Johnny truly wishes he didn’t feel so accomplished every time he makes that happen.

Carbomb just rolls his eyes. “Okay, shut up now, it’s gonna start.”

The lights, which flickered a couple of times, blink off, leaving them in pitch dark. When they blink back on a moment later, there’s a guy on the platform.

Johnny isn’t entirely sure what he’d been expecting, but it definitely wasn’t some tall, skinny white dude with long hair full of what looks like chicken feathers, wearing nothing but a pair of palazzo pants and a harmonica headset.

He introduces himself as Lord of the Beasts, and begins creating loops with the harmonica, tambourine, and what turns out to be an old tin chili can full of rocks.

Carbomb seems enraptured, along with the rest of the scattered crowd, but Johnny lasts about fifteen minutes before tugging Seguin’s wrist and leaning over to ask, “Yo, I think I’m full up on culture. You wanna go step outside for a minute?”

Seguin follows him outside, and they wander partway down the block to the stoop of a closed shop, and sit down.

It’s a nice night. A little breeze ruffles their hair, and Seguin turns his face toward it, leaning back against the door behind them with a contented sigh.

“What?” he asks, when he catches Johnny staring a moment later.

“Nothing.” Johnny scuffs his shoes on the cement underfoot, forcing himself to look away.

They’re both quiet for a minute, and then Johnny says, “So that show is really fucking weird.”

Seguin cracks up, doing that thing again where he tilts his head back and makes Johnny want to punch himself in the face, he’s so goddamn pretty. “No shit. Kinda entertaining, though.”

“Oh. Shit, you wanna go back? We can.”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Seguin says. “I like it right here.”

They get quiet again, Johnny’s thoughts racing as Seguin shuts his eyes, leaning back.

“So,” Johnny says, when the silence starts to make him itch. “You tried talking to Bergeron?”
“Mmhm.”

“What’d he say?”

“Not a lot.” Seguin doesn’t actually move, but Johnny can feel him tense up from two feet away.

“Did he listen?”

“Nope.”

“Oh.”

Seguin still doesn’t open his eyes, and Johnny takes the excuse to watch him.

“He told me Malkin’s parents kicked him out.” Seguin isn’t quite frowning as he says it, but his mouth is a thin, straight line.

Johnny sighs. “I kinda figured.” When he glances back up, Seguin is looking at him.

“You did?”

“I guess.” Johnny hesitates. “I didn’t think too much about it, but I guess it’s not all that surprising.”

“I guess,” Seguin agrees.

“What would your parents do?” Johnny asks, feeling as surprised as Seguin looks when he hears the words out loud.

“Uh,” Seguin says, frowning for real this time. “I dunno, honestly. I mean, I could give a fuck what my Dad’d say. I haven’t seen him in, like, three years, or something. But Mom would probably be kinda pissed.”

“You think?”


“Just curious,” Johnny says.

Seguin looks at him shrewdly. “You wanted to see if I’d deny it. Being into guys, I mean. Didn’t you?”

“I, uh,” Johnny falters, caught off guard. “...Maybe a little. But I was also genuinely curious.”

Seguin doesn’t look pissed. He just shrugs again. “What’d your parents do?”

Johnny actually has to think about it for a moment. “Um, I think my dad was kind of freaked out at first, but mostly because he didn’t know what to do or say, or whatever. But once he figured out I was still, like, me, or whatever, that I was still into sports and action movies and stuff he could talk to me about, he was fine. And my mom was actually pretty great about it, in her own way. She never made a big deal about it at home, but I think she went to bat for me pretty hard with the league board and stuff. To make sure nobody gave me shit.”

Seguin gives a low whistle. “Woah, no shit.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, and another little pang of guilt catches him by surprise. “She can be pretty okay, when she wants to be. Sucks about Malkin, though.”
“I guess,” says Seguin. He doesn’t sound convinced.

Johnny tilts sideways, bumping their elbows together companionably. “Hey, man, give Bergy time. He’s all dumb and in love right now, he’ll wake up eventually.”

“Sure,” Seguin says. “It sucks, I’ve wanted to do a roadtrip before senior year, like, forever. Maybe go see an actual ocean or something and do a bunch of stupid shit before we have to get all responsible for graduation and stuff, you know? I was really hoping he’d come with me.” He glances back down the street toward the annex venue when the door opens, spilling blue light and thumping, rhythmic bass out into the night. When he turns back, he catches Johnny looking.

“What?”

Johnny shrugs.

For a moment, Johnny’s convinced that Seguin is going to let it pass, but then he leans forward. Inches apart, he hesitates.

“Do you wanna kiss me?”

Johnny’s palms have gone cold and sweaty at his sides, and his heart is ratcheting up, trapped like a bird between his ribs.

“I don’t want to be your gay experiment,” Johnny says, quietly.

Seguin swallows. Johnny watches his Adam’s apple bob up and down with it. He swallows again, and licks his lips.

“I’m pretty sure it’s safe to say that it’s not an experiment,” he says.

Johnny raises his eyebrows, and Seguin nods once.

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “Okay, then.”

Seguin leans in, and so does Johnny, and Seguin’s breath is warm against his cheek, and his hand is warm where it finds Johnny’s between them, bodies pressed tight in the narrow doorway. Seguin is warm, and he smells good. His hair is soft between Johnny’s searching fingers, and his mouth is eager against Johnny’s, lips parting and tongue pressing into his mouth with a low moan that makes Johnny shiver.

When they pull apart, Seguin’s hair is sticking up where Johnny’s fingers mussed it, and his cheeks are flushed.

He says, “Huh.”

Johnny stares at him. “...Huh?”

“You’re a really good kisser,” Seguin clarifies.

“Thanks,” says Johnny. “Why the fuck do you sound surprised?”

Seguin snorts a laugh. “I’m not! It’s not that. It’s just, I dunno. I guess I figured that kissing a guy would feel different than kissing a girl.”

“You’re so fucking weird,” Johnny says.
Seguin shrugs, and kisses him again.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like everyone should know that this show exists. Or it did, in 2008. I was there. There was also a tiki bar on wheels, and at one point we all got to stand in the dark and listen to the tambourine and harmonica because the loop pedal thing blew a fuse.
July: Geno

Geno fidgets, trying and failing to get comfortable on the park bench under him as he waits. He keeps glancing around every time he hears someone coming, and it’s probably making him look twitchy and suspicious, and he’s nearly convinced himself to get up and walk around a little to take the nervous edge off, when he hears footsteps again. This time, they belong to Denis, grinning as he rounds the low shrub hedge buffering the park from the street, and bounding over to tackle Geno in a hug.

“You’re alive!” he yells, as Geno does his best to keep them both from tumbling backwards off the bench. “Oh my god, and your hair is super long! Mom would flip.” He finally releases Geno, plunking down on the bench beside him and giving him a scrutinizing once-over.

“You know I’m alive,” Geno says, in Russian. “I texted you.”

“Whatever, it could’ve been an imposter, you don’t know,” Denis says, wisely. He’s still grinning, beaming like they haven’t seen each other in years, and Geno’s gut wrenches with an increasingly familiar twist of guilt. “How’ve you been?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t talk to you sooner,” Geno blurts, and Denis’ eyes widen, and then soften. He looks like their mom. “Really, I’m so sorry. I guess I was thinking I didn’t want you to get into trouble, but maybe that was stupid, I don’t know.”

“Dude.” Denis sighs, switching to Russian himself when he says, “Nah, I think I get it. Or, like, I don’t, but I probably would’ve done the same thing if it was me dad kicked out first.”

“First?” Geno says, momentarily alarmed before Denis waves him off.

“No, no, nothing happened. I just always figured I’d be the one to, y’know. Cause a giant meltdown with him.”

Geno winces, nodding. “Yeah. Has he been treating you okay?”

“Eh.” Denis shrugs. “He hasn’t been around much, honestly. He hasn’t gone back to Russia,” he adds quickly, at a surprised look from Geno. “No, it’s more like he leaves early for work every day, and stays super late. I think it’s to avoid Mom.”


“Because she’s fucking pissed at him, is why,” Denis says, with a derisive snort. “Are you kidding? If he’d wanted to do one thing to tip her over the edge, he got it right by kicking you out. I mean, not that he’ll admit that’s what he did.”

Geno rolls his eyes. “He told me I could come back when I wanted to stop dating boys.”

“I know,” says Denis, looking momentarily sheepish. “I’ve been doing a lot of eavesdropping lately, when they fight. Dad’s been really adamant about how you’re welcome back whenever you want, if.” He makes a disgusted noise in his throat, lip curling. “And he lectures us about responsibility. Christ.”

“So what does Mom say?” Geno presses. “She was there the first time when I told them both, and she backed him up.”
“I think she was shocked,” Denis concedes, biting his lip. “Like, it took her a couple of weeks, but then one night at dinner Dad starts going off about you, and how ungrateful and childish you’re being, and she, uh. She blew up,” he finishes, simply, shrugging.

Geno’s eyes widen. “Blew up? Mama?”

For all their mother maintains a consistently old-world stoicism and stern facade, Geno can’t remember the last time he heard her yell. The idea of her raising her voice to her husband over dinner is nearly unthinkable. He can’t even picture it.

“Yeah,” Denis breathes, like he knows exactly what Geno’s thinking. “It was nuts. She told him it was his fault, he was tearing our family apart, not you, and if he had any sense he’d take responsibility and go find you and apologize.”

“Woah,” says Geno. “So...what’d he do?”

Denis snorts a mirthless laugh. “He been by lately to apologize to you?”

“No,” Geno says, slowly. “But what about him and Mama?”

“Well, it’s like I said.” Denis resettles himself on the bench, legs crossed under him so he can pick at the fraying hem of his jeans. “He started leaving really early for work, coming back super late, and just avoiding us whenever he’s around. But I overheard him telling Mama the other night, he won’t go back to Russia until he’s sure this family is back on the right path.”

“Gross,” says Geno.

Denis says, “Seriously.”

They sit in silence for a moment or two, Denis tugging at stray threads of denim, and Geno staring off into space and trying to wrap his brain around everything. There’d been a momentary surge of pride, hearing about his mother’s reaction. But then the crushing realization that all of this comes down to him returns, bearing down on him like a wave until he can barely see the surface.

“I wish this hadn’t happened,” he says, and nothing he tries can keep the misery out of his voice. Denis looks up sharply. “I’m sorry. Everything was so good, and now it’s fucked up, just because--”

“If you say it’s just because of you, or some bullshit like that, so help me, G,” Denis snaps. In the young, reedy face, the shadow of something decidedly adult flickers, catching Geno off guard. “That makes you sound like Dad. Like this is some choice you made specifically to screw up the little perfect-family act we had going.”

“Not perfect,” Geno protests, weakly. “Not perfect, and not an act. I was--” his voice cracks and he has to take a couple of seconds to compose himself before going on. “I was happy. With you, and Mama.”

“Well sure,” says Denis, mercifully overlooking Geno’s wavering tone. “But come on, be real. You really think Dad wouldn’t have found some other way to fuck it all up, if you hadn’t been the obvious excuse? It probably would’ve been me, saying I like American hockey better than Russian, and he would’ve done the exact same thing.”

Geno snorts a laugh in spite of himself. “Maybe you’re right.”

“I’m right,” Denis says, wisely. “Trust me. I’m the one who’s been dealing with his bullshit the most. He’s been itching for a reason to ship us all back to Russia, just to prove he’s still relevant.”
“Harsh,” Geno says, even as he silently agrees.

“Harsh, maybe, but true,” says Denis. “You wanna know what I think? I think he’s mad Mama’s business is doing so well these past couple years, and she doesn’t need his sorry ass like she used to.”

“You think?” asks Geno. Denis shrugs.

“From the way he talks to her, and how he talks about the restaurant, yeah. I think so. I think there’s some super thin ice happening.”

“She’d never leave him,” Geno says, but hesitates. “Would she?”

“Dunno,” Denis says, and now he sounds frustrated. “Honestly, I wish she would. I think she’d be happier.”

“Yeah, but she’s…” Geno doesn’t know how he’d meant to finish this sentence, hesitating and mulling things over silently as Denis watches.

“She’s what?” Denis presses. “A woman? His property? C’mon, G, you of all people’ve got to be past that old-world shit.”

In all honesty, Geno isn’t sure. His ingrained gut reflex toward divorce is general shock and scandal, but Denis has a point. The narrative his father’s woven over the course of his lifetime is fraying like Denis’ cuff, as the repeated mantras of integrity and loyalty and duty to family seem suddenly colorless and empty.

“She works so hard already,” Geno finally finishes, sighing. “It would get even harder.”

“Whatever, I’d help,” Denis says, fiercely. “She wouldn’t even have to pay me. We could take extra catering orders and stay open longer, we’d make it work.”

“I’d help,” says Geno, and then hesitates. “If she’d let me.”

“She wants you home,” says Denis, suddenly quiet. “I know she does.”

“I want to be home,” Geno says. There’s another twinge of guilt, this time tied to the thought of Patrice. As heavy as it weighs on him to take advantage of the Bergerons’ hospitality the way he has, he can’t shake the memory of Patrice’s expression at the thought of Geno leaving. But as hospitable as they may be, the Bergerons are not his family, and Geno misses his family.

Denis says, “I’ll talk to her.”

“Give her my new number,” Geno says, with a sudden surge of nerves coursing through his belly at the thought. “Tell her to call me if she wants, maybe we can talk about me coming back to work or something, to start.”

“Yeah,” says Denis, clearly warming to the idea and grinning. “Yeah, that’d be awesome.”

The sun is beginning to sink into the tree-line along the far edge of the park, and the evening chatter of birds swells to compete with the soft whooshing of traffic. Geno settles back on the bench, watching fireflies start to wink and flicker in the gathering dusk and feeling, under the familiar worry, something warm and startlingly close to hope.
July: Patrice

Geno has frustratingly few answers when Patrice asks him how hanging out with his brother went.

“Was he mad?”

“Not really.” Geno shrugs, digging around in a basket of clean laundry he’s just dropped onto his bed. Guillaume’s bed. Patrice keeps trying to censor the part of his brain that defaults to the option where Geno just stays here, but it’s harder than anticipated.

“Okay, so what was he like, then?” Patrice persists. He flops down onto the bed beside the basket, making it bounce and nearly capsize before Geno catches it. “Oops, sorry.”

Geno’s expression doesn’t waver, but Patrice is almost sure he sees something like irritation flare behind his eyes. Which could be true, or it could just be something Patrice has spent the last couple weeks scanning for so hard that now his brain is just showing him what he expects to see. It’s a self-perpetuating cycle, where the harder Patrice worries about annoying Geno, the more annoying he gets. The distant, rational part of him gets to watch like an out of body experience as the rest of him turns into an insecure, clingy jackass.

“He was more grown up,” Geno says, after a moment’s consideration, frowning. He hesitates before adding, “He say our mom and dad fighting more. Mama telling Dad to get head out of ass or get out.”

“Wait, seriously?” Patrice sits up on an elbow, watching as Geno pauses midway through folding a shirt. “Shit.”

“I was surprised as you.”

“So,” Patrice starts, hesitantly, “what does that mean? For you, I mean.”

“Means parents are fighting,” Geno says. His expression wavers again, and this time Patrice is positive it’s not just his mind playing tricks. “Denis say it not my fault, but--”

“Of course it’s not!” Patrice bursts out, before he can help himself. He flushes at the look Geno gives him -- somewhere between exasperation and resignation -- but doesn’t waver, jaw set.

Geno says, “This wouldn’t be happening to my family if I wasn’t like this. Pretty sure that makes it my responsibility, at least partly.

“So what, you were just supposed to go through the rest of your life faking it?” Patrice demands, with more venom than he’d really intended.

“Not the rest of life, no,” Geno snaps back. He abandons his folding, standing back and pushing a hand through his hair. “But maybe until after high school would have been easier. I wasn’t thinking. It was selfish to put them in this position just because...because I wanted this.” He gestures between them.

Patrice’s heart sink like lead, helpless and heavy. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to say to that,” he says, quietly. Just like that, all the anger is sucked out of him, replaced only by that sick, plummeting feeling in his chest. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Neither do I,” says Geno. He falters, and then, “I think, um. Could I have some space? Just for a
couple hours. I need to think.”

Patrice had been pretty sure he couldn’t feel any worse. He’d been wrong.

“Sure,” he says, standing up and avoiding Geno’s eyes in favor of stretching and straightening his shirt. “Yeah, um. I told Marchy I’d text him to hang out sometime this week, anyway.”

Geno nods and Patrice wavers, hesitating, leaning up to brush a kiss on Geno’s cheek before he forces himself out of the room.

He feels no calmer an hour later, sitting in the car with Marchy in a parking lot behind Taco Bell and picking disinterestedly at some shitty nachos. Marchy appears as oblivious as ever, devouring a stack of mystery meat tacos the size of his own head as he taps his foot along with the car radio. It’s a surprise, then, when he crumples up the last wrapper, stuffing it back into the bag as he rounds on Patrice and asks, “So. What’s eating you?”

“How?” Patrice stops dead with a chip raised halfway to his mouth. “I’m fine.”

“You’re full of shit and a terrible liar,” Marchy counters. Patrice doesn’t even have the heart to contradict him. “So what, is this about your boy’s family drama, or something?”

“Oh my god, Segs,” Patrice groans. “I told him he has the biggest goddamn mouth.”

“Well, is it?” Marchy persists, not even trying to deny the gossip.

“Kind of,” says Patrice, slowly. “I shouldn’t have said anything to Segs, it’s not my business to go spreading aro--”

“If he’s living with you, it kind of is,” Marchy interrupts. “I mean, you at least owe it to your best friends to explain why you’ve spent literally months ditching us. Don’t get me wrong, it’s really good what you and your family are doing, helping him out.”

Patrice gives him a shrewd look. “...But?”

“But I miss you, man,” says Marchy, baldly. “I mean, we both do, me and Segs.”

“Segs is pissed at me,” Patrice mutters, mutinously.

“Segs is pissed at you because you keep blowing him off, stringing him along, and keeping shit from him. He’s got some pretty major shit going on, and you’ve been too busy wrapped up in yourself to be there for him.”

“Fuck off,” Patrice snaps, suddenly defensive. “I haven’t forgotten you guys. Some stuff is just bigger.”

“Nothing is so big that it doesn’t leave you any time for your friends,” Marchy says, sagely. He just glares when Patrice makes a face. “Seriously.”

“Oh my god.” Patrice rolls his eyes, poking another chip around the plastic tray of meat and day-glo cheese. “What could Segs possibly need that only I could help him deal with it?”

“Well, you’re his best fucking friend, for starters,” Marchy snaps. He hesitates a beat, and then adds, “And I think he might be dating Johnny Toews. So like, there’s that.”

Patrice is pretty sure he can count on one hand the number of times since they’ve known each other that Marchy’s been angry enough off the ice to raise his voice. And in that handful of times, Patrice
I...what? He’s what?” Patrice splutters, nearly spilling the nachos all over his lap. He shoves the tray onto the dashboard, turning in his seat to face Marchy. “You’re kidding, right?”

Marchy snorts. “Well he hasn’t said the word ‘date’, and he kinda flips out whenever I do, but, like, they’re doing something. They’ve been out a couple times now, I think, and he won’t tell me anything specific, but man, you know Ty. You can tell a mile off when he’s into someone, you know how he gets.”

“But he was such a dick to me about Geno!” Patrice explodes, unable to contain it. His mind is reeling, and rage seems like the easiest option. “He was all homophobic and shit!”

“He acted like an ignorant prick for a while, yeah,” Marchy agrees. “But dude, we both know he’s not actually that closed-minded.”

“That’s not an excuse,” Patrice shoots back, jaw set. “If he’s not, he shouldn’t’ve acted like one.”

“Fair enough,” Marchy says, conceding. “So what, you’re gonna just keep punishing him for it forever? He’s been trying, man. You haven’t been around to see, but he’s really been trying to figure his shit out. You know I’m no good at, like, giving people good advice and shit. He needs you. Especially with this.”

“Yeah, well, would it kill him to apologize?” Patrice grumbles, sagging back in his seat. Marchy cracks a grin.

“Probably.”

“Whatever,” mutters Patrice. He’s trying to hold onto the anger, but he must be growing as a person or something, because all he keeps coming back to is how hard it sucked trying to hide everything from his friends and his teammates for the past few years, and how fucking pointless and destructive that’d turned out to be. “He’s really dating Johnny? You’re sure?”

Marchy gives a shrug, frowning. “Not, like, a thousand percent positive, but I mean, yeah. He got all weird the other day and said they’d been hanging out, and then he got all red when I started asking questions and told me to shut the fuck up and stay out of it.”

“But I thought Johnny and Looch were…” Patrice trails off helplessly, trying to figure out some sequence of events where all this makes sense.

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“Yeah, I dunno about that,” Marchy admits. “Like, they always said it was just a friends with benefits thing. And you’ve gotta admit, Ty is kind of exactly Toews’s type.”

Patrice has to think about this a second, and then he cracks up, in spite of himself. “Oh my god,” he says, burying his face in his hands. “Oh my god, you’re right.” He takes a couple of steadying breaths, trying to put his reeling thoughts into words. “This is weird, though, right? Like, this isn’t something we were expecting?”

“I keep wondering that, too,” Marchy admits, sobering slightly. “I mean, no, I don’t think we missed any huge, glaring signs. Maybe this is just what happens if you’re around a bunch of people who’re open about it. It gets easier to, I dunno. Explore, or whatever. If that’s what you’re into.”

“Oh god,” Patrice makes a face, groaning. “Oh god, please never talk about exploring like that,” he begs. “That’s just weird.”
Marchy swats at his knee, glaring. “Okay, okay, but you know what I mean.”


“Yeah, me too,” says Marchy. He raises his eyebrows, smirking. “So I guess that’d make them secretly dating completely impossible and unheard of.”

“Oh, you’re hilarious,” says Patrice.
The steady *snk-snk* of his skates on the ice has always been soothing to Johnny; kept his mind from wandering, and kept him anchored in his body. He likes the midday quiet of the rink, with only a few other people out there with him, gliding in endless laps around the perfect, glistening oblong surface of the ice. It’s strange, without the context of hockey to give him purpose, but in a pleasantly indulgent sort of way.

Or, usually it is.

Across the ice Segs is dicking around, trying to imitate what looks like a figure skating move, and mostly falling on his ass. Johnny skates around and hops up onto the boards in front of the benches, grinning to himself as on the other side of the rink, Segs tries the move again and ends up with both arms windmilling, trying to stay upright.

Segs catches him watching after a minute or two, making a face and skating over to where Johnny’s perched.

“You laughing at me?” he demands, and Johnny grins, nodding.

“Yup.”

Segs shoves him, but Johnny catches himself on the lip of the boards. Segs leans in close, glaring in mock affront, and it’d be really easy to lean in and kiss him. There’s nobody at the rink who’d even start to give a damn.

“You wanna talk about it, or something?” Segs asks, looking so out of sorts asking the question that Johnny cracks up.

“Oh my god, man, it’s not a big deal. Don’t worry about it.”

“No!” Segs says, quickly. He looks genuinely apologetic. “Sorry, no, just. I’m not super great at that kinda thing, but I’m trying to work on it, I swear. I...like you. I want you to be able to talk to me about shit.”

The strange sweetness of the statement catches Johnny off guard, and for a long moment, he just looks at Segs.

“Thanks,” he says, at last, for lack of something better. “No, I mean it. That’s actually pretty fucking sweet. I guess I’m not really used to talking about stuff a whole lot, either.”

“Well you don’t have to feel obligated,” Segs mutters, going pink and glancing away.
Johnny just leans over, bumping their elbows together and swinging his feet so the heels of his skates knock against the boards, resounding dully through the big, empty space. “My mom’s been riding my ass for months now. She wants me to focus more on school and the future, which is her way of saying things that aren’t hockey, and this is gonna sound stupid, but I’m super shitty at not doing stuff that she wants. I’ve always been an overachiever, so we never fought much until recently, when suddenly it’s like she just expects me to grow up and grow out of everything that makes me happy.”

When he looks back up, Segs is watching him with wide eyes. “Damn,” he says. “Didn’t you, like, basically run away from home a few months ago, though?”

Johnny groans. “Oh my god, everybody keeps saying that. No, I just...took some space. She knew where I was, it was fine.”

“Oh, I bet it was,” says Segs. He just grins when Johnny glares at him. “So what, she doesn’t want you playing hockey anymore? That seems kinda ass-backwards, especially if you get a scholarship or something.”

“Trust me,” Johnny says, darkly, “I already brought that up. But my grades are good, and she has a bunch of contacts from college, and at work and stuff, so she just told me we don’t have to worry about relying on hockey to get me into a good school.”

“Yikes,” says Segs, feelingly.

“Yup,” Johnny agrees. “So to top it off, she goes and talks to some guy in another department at her job, and now they want me to come in and interview for an internship.”

“Ugh, fuck that!” Segs says, pulling a face. “What the hell, man. What does your mom even do?”

“She’s in middle management at some business firm downtown,” Johnny says. “Honestly, I’m not even totally sure what she does, since every time she tries to explain, it’s so boring I just zone out. But like, then I keep wondering how stupid I’d be not to do this, you know?”

“I really don’t, actually,” says Segs, and when Johnny snorts a laugh, he demands, “What? I’m sorry, I’m having a really hard time seeing the upside to turning into a suit.”

“Well, I mean, what if hockey doesn’t work out?” Johnny persists, hating himself a little even just saying the words out loud. “What if I get an injury or something, or I don’t get picked up out of college? The likelihood of going pro is so slim--”

“So why even try?” Segs asks, sounding actually a little upset. “Jesus, man, that’s fucking bleak.”

“Ugh, no, that’s totally not what I said,” Johnny says, quickly. He feels a little sick at the idea. “No, like, it might be smart to have a backup plan.”

“You’re a teenager,” says Segs. “Your backup plan is being young enough to figure shit out later.”

“I…” Johnny starts, trailing off. “Uh. I’m actually having a really hard time arguing with that.”

“Because my logic is fucking flawless.” Segs hops off the boards, tugging Johnny down after him. They pick up a steady pace, wending between the scattered few other skaters sharing the ice.

After a moment or two, Johnny says, “So then, what? I just blow off this interview thing and tell my mom to shove it? I still have to live with her for another year, and she seems pretty adamant.”

“You could tell her to slow her damn roll and hold off for a bit,” Segs suggests. He sucks on his
lower lip, worrying it between his teeth in thought. “You could come on that roadtrip with me next month and buy yourself some time to figure it out.”

Johnny nearly trips. “Seriously? You’re asking me to go with you?”

Segs just shrugs. “Sure, if you want to.”

“Oh, you’re asking me to go with you?”

“Who else is going?”

“Just me, so far,” Segs says, cheeks going pink again. “It’d be nice to have company.”

“Who?” Segs says, watching him beadily.

“Nothing,” says Johnny, quickly. “I mean, I guess I’d just have to think about it.”

Segs sighs exasperatedly, speeding up a little and doing a quick swivel so he’s skating backwards, matching pace with Johnny so they can see eye to eye. “Dude, you’re terrible at bullshit. If you don’t wanna go, just fucking say so.”

It’s not that Johnny doesn’t want to go. Actually, that’s kind of the problem, just how bad he does want to.

“Look,” he starts, and then falters. “I just...I dunno. We haven’t really figured out what this is, right? And we don’t even know what we want.”

“You mean you don’t know what you want.” Segs regards Johnny with a look that’s at once haughty and wounded; something stubborn and set settling into the jut of his chin as he swivels back around to skate forward again. “Because I thought I was pretty fucking clear.”

“Yeah…” Johnny stares out across the rink, at the sponsor ads pasted to the boards, and the fraying peewee divisional championship banners hanging from the rafters above their heads. “Look, I just need more time to figure everything out.”

Segs looks unimpressed, but he just shrugs, finishing their lap and stopping next to the boards where he’d stashed his water bottle. “Yeah, well, I guess you’ve gotta do you.”

Johnny skids to a stop behind him, frowning. “What, you’re leaving already? We’ve still got almost half an hour of open ice, and then I thought we could get lunch or something.”

“Raincheck, maybe.” Segs pats his pockets for his car keys, moving toward the gate. “Look, Toews, I like you. I’m into whatever this is, that we’re doing here. It’s fun and it’s stupid hot, and I think you’re pretty into it, too. But fuck, man, I’m not gonna sit around and put my shit on hold until you figure out if you have time for me. I’ve done enough of that, lately.”

“I,” Johnny starts, stumbling over his words before they even leave his throat. “Ty, that’s not--”

“It’s cool,” says Segs, even though he doesn’t really sound like he believes himself. “No, seriously. Take a little time, or whatever. Figure your shit out and get back to me.”

Johnny means to protest. He means to say or do something to get Segs to stop, or at least wait and hear him out, but that’s kind of a problem, since Johnny doesn’t have a damn clue what he wants to say. He ends up with only a mumbled, “Yeah, sure,” and then Tyler’s disappeared out the gate, leaving the heavy door to the ice to swing shut with a clang behind him.
August: Geno

Geno spends the weeks following the afternoon with his brother pretending not to notice the way Patrice is winding taut and brittle with every stretching silence between them.

They’re fine, mostly. Still hanging out on the couch in the den and marathoning whatever’s on TV until Mr Bergeron pops his head in and makes a snide comment. Going for late-night fries down at the diner. Playing video games and making out and fooling around, when Patrice’s parents are at work and the quiet of the house pulls at them like a tide.

It’s only when things get quiet between them that Geno sees it. In the pauses where Patrice stops himself from saying something, and Geno doesn’t say any of the things he probably could, or should. He just can’t bring himself to tell Patrice everything will be okay, when he doesn’t know for sure himself.

Geno knows Patrice wants him to stay, is the thing. He feels Patrice clinging to Geno’s presence in his family home like it’s some big, make-or-break factor, and that in turn makes Geno nervous. Because it hadn’t seemed that way to him, before, but now…

He can’t focus on any one single priority, and it makes his palms itch, and his stomach turn.

Patrice says, “School starts again next month.”

The words are casual, but he can’t seem to help the little upwards tilt of the last syllable.

Geno hums agreement, passing him another rinsed plate to load into the dishwasher. “Yeah. Summer feels so short, always.”

Patrice glances at him as he passes over another dish, mouth thin and worried. “Are you still thinking about the dorms?”

“Waiting to hear back,” Geno says, with a nod. “They probably put me on wait list, since apply so late.”

“What, seriously?”

Geno shrugs. “Supposed to have application in before end of Spring quarter.”

“Fuck,” says Patrice.

“We be okay if I go home,” Geno says, because the power of Patrice’s cumulative anxiety is going to give him some kind of stress condition by proxy. “Really.”

“I know, I’m not worried,” Patrice says, lying through his teeth. He’s a terrible liar, especially when he’s not really trying. “It’s cool.”

Geno slides the last plate into the dishwasher, setting damp hands on Patrice’s shoulders and planting a kiss on his forehead. “Cool,” he echoes, with a lopsided grin that forces a smile out of Patrice after only a moment or two’s resistance. “Wanna go watch SVU?”

They’re curled up on the couch together when Geno’s phone goes off in his pocket; the shitty wannabe smart phone he got when he left home and his parents’ family plan. It’s an unknown number, but the text is in Russian.
Evgeni, it’s your mama.

His heart drops like a stone and he must’ve made a sound, or something, because he can feel Patrice’s eyes on him suddenly. He says, “Text from Mama,” and somehow saying the words out loud drive reality home.

Geno doesn’t know what to even begin to say back, so he just texts, Hi, Mama. How’re you? It looks stupid and weird and impersonal, but he his send, anyway, because everything he actually wants to say is too big, too scary, to want to type out.

I miss you, she writes back, almost immediately followed with, have lunch tomorrow at the restaurant? I have to be there all day for inventory.

Patrice watches silently as Geno fumbles with the keypad on his phone, thumbing out, Sure! Want help with inventory?

Geno stares at this for a long moment, before deleting the last sentence and instead asking, What time? Hating himself for losing nerve.

Are you free around noon?

Geno texts his affirmative, settling back with his arm around Patrice’s shoulders. He says, “I’m having lunch with her tomorrow at the restaurant.”

“Hey, that’s great!” Patrice says, gamely. “I’m happy for you, G.”

And that, at least, Geno does believe. There’s none of the stiffness in his voice, or the quiet tilt of his chin Geno’s come to associate with Patrice’s game face about possibly moving back home. He gives Patrice’s shoulders a little squeeze, leaning down to kiss him slow and deep and grateful.

It’s not until later, when he’s lying in bed and staring up at Guillaume’s glow in the dark constellations, that it occurs to him to worry -- not a lot, but maybe just a little -- that this is some kind of set-up. Something with his father’s influence behind it. No, he tells himself, no, Denis seemed to know what he was talking about.

Nevertheless, he doesn’t get a whole lot of sleep that night.

Walking into the restaurant the next day feels at once disconcertingly alien, and as if he’d never been gone. The same burnished copper samovar gleams behind the spotless counter; the tables with their red and white linens, and the lingering rich scent of dough and butter and herbs. The familiarity washes through him with a palpable ache.

“Mama?” he calls, locking the door behind him and pocketing his key. “I let myself in. I hope that’s okay.”

“What are you talking about?” His mother comes out of the back office, stretching and pushing her hair back off her face. She smiles when she sees him, something in her austere features softening so he doesn’t even think about what he’s doing until he’s hugging her, hanging on like he hasn’t for years. He doesn’t remember her feeling so small, fragile and birdlike, in the lanky span of his arms. “Of course it’s okay,” she says, patting his back before releasing him. “How are you? You seem taller.”

Geno grins, unable to help himself. “I doubt that.”
“Nonsense. You’ve been growing like a weed since you were born, I don’t expect you to stop until you hit the ceiling.” She swats at him, eyes crinkled in pleasure, and he pretends not to notice the wetness glistening there. “You hungry?”

“Always,” he says, truthfully. “What can I help with?”

She brushes him away as he follows her into the big industrial kitchen with a *tsk*, rummaging around in the walk-in for a second and bringing out a stack of containers. “We had a catering order yesterday, and there are some leftovers. Have a seat and cut some bread, I’ll just heat it up in the microwave.”

Geno does as he’s told, cutting them each a couple of slices as she heats up some soup. “This smells amazing,” he says, setting the rest of the loaf aside and picking at the crust of one of the slices.

His mother eyes him critically. “How’ve you been eating?” she asks, beady eyes taking careful stock of him until he wants to squirm. “The Bergerons, they feed you okay?”

“They’ve been great, yeah,” he says, and then adds quickly, “but it’s not the same. I missed...this.” Somehow, saying *I missed your cooking* feels to presumptuous. Too hopeful. And he’s not ready to hope, yet.

She just laughs. “Nothing like Russian food.”

The microwave beeps and distracts the awkward silence threatening to overtake their pause in conversation. It isn’t until they’re both sat at a small table in the back of the kitchen with steaming bowls of soup in front of them that Geno dares to ask, “How’ve you been?”

His mother takes a bite of her food before answering. “Alright. Business is doing well, even for summer.”

“Hey, that’s great!” Geno tears off a couple pieces of bread, poking them around in his bowl. “Denis said you’ve been busy.”

“Your brother’s been a big help,” she says. “Is that all he told you?”


“Mmhm.” She eyes him levelly over a sip of water. “Denis is young. I wish he didn’t have to know some of the things he probably does, but...”

She trails off, shrugging and returning to her food, leaving Geno to flounder through a sea of questions that feel invasive to the point of blasphemy.

“So, you and Dad?” he says at last, tentative. She nods.

“Your father and I have never exactly seen eye to eye on some things, but I don’t think I ever realized that there would come a day I’d find my limit.”

“You mean, uh,” Geno falters, toying with his food. It’s weird, talking to his mom like this, like a grownup, about stuff that was supposed to happen between parents and behind closed doors, to other families.

“I mean that you are welcome home, Evgeni, and your father is not.” She says it with an iron finality he’s only ever heard her use with troublesome suppliers and drunk patrons. None of the deferential tone he’s used to hearing her use about her husband. She reaches across the table suddenly, taking
his hand in both of hers and giving it a squeeze as she looks almost beseechingly into his face. He’s distressed to realize that there are tears in her eyes again. “I’m so sorry, I should have made the decision much sooner, before he’d forced you to leave. I shouldn’t--”

“Mama,” Geno cuts her off, holding onto her hand and forcing himself to look at her. “Mama, it’s fine. I understand, really. I didn’t expect...anything,” he finishes lamely.

She makes an angry noise at that, reclaiming her hand to swipe quickly at her eyes and resume composure like nothing had ever been amiss.

“That’s nonsense,” she snaps. “I’m your mother. I’m supposed to stand up for you and protect you.”

“So is Dad,” Geno says, with a shrug. “But there you go.”

She gives a brittle little laugh, rolling her eyes and muttering a few choice curse words under her breath. “Yes, well, there we go. So that is why he will sleep in a motel, and you will sleep in your own bed.”

Something swells in Geno’s chest and bursts, filling him with a warm, effervescent giddiness until he feels almost drunk with relief.

“You’re sure?” he forces himself to ask? “Really, you’re positive you’re okay with, uh...everything?”

She tuts, the corners of her mouth turning down ever so slightly, but then she nods. “I can’t pretend I understand,” she admits, “but I’ve come to the decision that I shouldn’t necessarily have to understand every single thing about you to still want to be your mother, and have you under my roof.”

Geno doesn’t know what else to say to that, so he returns to his soup, still buoyed up on relief and elation. Grateful that she doesn’t seem to notice when he has to brush away the wetness at the corners of his eyes.
“Don’t freak out,” says Geno, and Patrice’s heart immediately begins a frightened-rabbit flutter and jolt routine against his ribs.

“I’m not freaking out,” he lies.

Geno snorts, quirking an amused eyebrow. “Right. Just like you not freaking out for last few weeks.”

“I’m fine,” Patrice insists, glaring. “I keep telling you.”

“Uh-huh,” says Geno.

“Bag of dicks,” says Patrice.

“You so nice, such nice boy.” Geno kisses him, patting the top of Patrice’s head and looking levelly at him. “Mama asked me to move home, and I say yes.”

He says it in a rush, words spilling over and through and around each other like the first stream of water breaching a dam and Patrice’s nerves swoop and flutter and then…

“Seriously? That’s amazing,” he says, shocked by his own sincerity. “G, that’s really great.”

Geno looks about as surprised as Patrice feels. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah,” Patrice says. “Yeah! No, I really do mean it, I promise. Um, but like…” he trails off, suddenly nervous again, but Geno shakes his head.

“We’re fine,” he says, firmly. “I promise. Promise, promise. I ask Mama and she said she doesn’t totally understand, but doesn’t have to. Wants to meet you soon. I tell her if she does, then she understand better.”

Patrice feels his cheeks flush, and he rolls his eyes. “Gross.”

“Gross, and true,” Geno agrees, beaming. He looks almost giddy, younger than he has in months and practically bouncing. “You really, really okay with this?”

“C’mon, man.” Patrice settles on one of the kitchen stools where they’ve just finished having breakfast. “What kind of shithead would I be to tell you not to move back home?”

The same kind of shithead he’s felt like for nearly a month now, probably, but who’s counting.

“I know you’ve been worried,” Geno says. It’s weird to hear out loud now what’s been unspoken between them for so long now. Some kind of mutual stalemate crumbling to dust and lightening the air around them. “I was, too.”

“Yeah, well,” Patrice mutters, but he doesn’t know how to finish the sentence. He just reaches out and tugs Geno closer, leaning up to kiss him.

“Thanks,” Geno mumbles against his mouth, and Patrice doesn’t want to ask what for, so he buries his fingers in Geno’s hair and deepens the kiss and hopes it conveys everything he doesn’t know how to articulate out loud.
They’re breathless and red-faced a few minutes later when they finally pull apart, Patrice composing himself enough to ask, “So, uh. When do you wanna go back?”

Geno considers. “Is tomorrow okay?” he asks, worrying his lower lip between his teeth.

“Yeah, of course,” Patrice says, grinning all over again and sliding off the stool as he grabs Geno’s hand. “That just means we have a lot to get done between now and when my parents get back from work.”

“Lots of things to find and pack, yes,” Geno agrees, and Patrice snorts.

“Packing, right. We’ll get to that eventually.”

He hauls a cackling Geno upstairs by the wrist. Geno, who pauses only to say, “You realize only going across town, right? Not going off to war. Can still sneak over and do dirty things while your parents at work.”

“Are you really arguing right now?” Patrice demands.

Geno takes his shirt off.

The next day, the house feels weird and empty as Patrice rattles around after breakfast. He wants to savor the last few weeks before school starts up again, the glorious and complete lack of agenda, but he can’t seem to settle to anything. Part of him blames the lack of Geno, or even just the sense of companionship he’d grown used to. He and his big brother had never been super tight, but the space he’d left when he went off to college had felt comfortably filled lately. ...Not that Geno in any sense feels like his brother. Oh god. Ew.

Patrice puts down the game controller and sags back into the couch, feeling vaguely traumatized by his own brain.

He’s not good at all this idle sitting around, he needs purpose. Something that’ll get him out of the house where he’s less at risk for accidental Flowers In The Attic recalls. Stupid summer reading.

Marchy’s on a camping trip with his family, Thorty’s already off getting settled in his new dorms. He could text Looch, or Davy, or Looch and Davy, but in the end, he sucks it up and drives over to Segs’ house. He probably should have texted, or called, or given some kind of warning, but frankly, Patrice is okay with limiting the means of communication they can use to yell at each other anymore.

Or, that’s what he tells himself to avoid feeling like a chickenshit.

Conveniently, Segs is home. He answers the door when Patrice rings the bell, already looking annoyed. His eyes widen a fraction when he sees Patrice.

“Oh, it’s you.”

“Who did you expect?” Patrice asks. Segs is still standing blocking the doorway, so he scuffs his shoe a little on the stoop.

Segs shrugs. “Someone selling something, or Jesus freaks or something.”

He turns around and shuffles back down the hall. After a moment’s hesitation and for lack of another option, Patrice follows.
“So, uh. What’re you up to?”

Segs wanders into the kitchen and Patrice follows. He pours himself a glass of what looks like iced tea from the fridge, and doesn’t offer Patrice any. He says, “Hanging out. I dunno.”

“Oh,” says Patrice, lamely. “Cool.”

“So, what do you want?” Segs asks. Patrice feels another pang of guilt and regret at the caustic, brittle tone. He’s never heard that tone directed at himself, and, frankly, it sucks. It also kicks his own anger back into gear.

“Look, I’m not the only one who’s been a dick here,” he snaps, before he can stop himself. Tyler’s eyes widen for a second, before he sags back into himself with a sardonic twist of his lip.

“Look, man. I’m not interested in fighting with you right now, so if you wanna get into--”

“No, no, I’m sorry.” Patrice backpedals wildly, trying to stay focused on why he came. “I don’t wanna fight, either. I actually-- I came here to apologize,” he finishes, in a rush.

Segs glares speculatively at him, sizing him up and looking as though he’s trying to read Patrice’s thoughts.

“You want some tea?” he asks, finally, stone-faced. Patrice nods. “Well, okay. You know where the glasses are.”

Patrice grabs a glass and pours himself some tea, following Segs out onto the deck where they lean against the railing overlooking the lawn. “Sorry I was a dick,” he says, tracing the geometric pattern on the side of his glass through the condensation. “Like. About everything.”

Segs glances over at him. “Me too,” he says.

“I should’ve been paying more attention lately.”

“Probably,“ agrees Segs. He smirks when Patrice makes a face at him. “What? It’s true! You got a boyfriend and it got all serious and you just--” he makes a poof gesture with his hands, slopping tea on the weathered boards.

“In my defense, it’s been pretty dramatic,” says Patrice.

“Isn’t it always,” says Segs, blandly.

Patrice kind of wants to knock him off the deck. Instead, he says, “Speaking of. Johnny Toews? Seriously?”

“Fucking Marchy!” Segs bursts out, half-laughing as he groans in frustration. “Jesus fuck. It’s not even a thing yet. Or at all. Or, I don’t know. It’s not a thing.”

“So then, what is it?” Patrice asks, pushing his momentary advantage of Segs’ getting all flustered and blushy.

“Dunno,” says Segs. “Really, I don’t. I think he’s into me, and I think I’m into him? But he keeps getting all weird, and I don’t know how to deal with it. I don’t even know if I want to deal with it.”

Patrice grins. “Yeah, that sounds like Johnny. So stuck in his own head, it’s a miracle when he gets anything done.”
“How the fuck have you been friends with him this long without punching him out?” Segs asks, and Patrice cracks up.

“How’s actually not that bad. You gotta give him a minute, sometimes, before he gets his head back on straight. But he’s good, dude. You could do a lot worse, trust me.”

Segs eyes him over the rim of his glass, finally asking, “So...you’re not surprised by this?”

“Surprise?” Patrice chokes, nearly getting tea up his nose. “Yeah, I’m surprised as hell, actually! But whatever, man. If this is what you want, I’m happy for you. I think it’s cool.”


“Last I checked, bisexuality is a thing, dude.”

“Fair enough,” Segs mutters. He’s still flushed pink to the tips of his ears, but the strange, hard expression is gone. “How about you and Malkin? Everything okay?”

“We’re good, yeah,” Patrice says. “You, uh. You heard he was staying with me this whole time?” Segs nods. “He just went home today, actually. His mom came around.”


Patrice winces. “So, we’re avoiding saying anything in front of your mom?”

“If you could, yeah,” Segs says. “You got lucky, man. Your parents are cool. Johnny’s too, mostly.”

“Yeah.” If Patrice has figured anything out in the last few months, it’s just how true that statement is. “Well, hey. We’ve only got one more year and then college. You still thinking about going away?”

“As far as my grades’ll let me,” Segs says, wincing. He hesitates, frowning suddenly. “It’ll be weird, though,” he admits. “Not being around you and Marchy.”

“Yeah, it will,” Patrice agrees, quietly. “But hey, we’ll figure it out.”

“Yeah,” says Segs. “Yeah, we will.”
The waiting lounge is immaculate, from the tasteful leather sofa and matching chairs, to the painstakingly curated ficus, the stylishly fatigued area rug, and the black and white photographs of what look like artistically arranged rocks. Johnny’s afraid to touch anything, even when the polite, smiling receptionist tells him to take a seat anywhere, and would he like some water, or maybe a soda? The guy looks maybe two years older than Johnny is, and about as curated as the ficus.

Johnny sits gingerly in one of the chairs, and it creaks ominously, but Receptionist Guy doesn’t glance up, so Johnny just balances there and does his best not to fidget or slide off onto the floor. The new pants his mom got him are made of some kind of slippery fabric that isn’t helping his cause at all, and the dress socks are making his ankles itch.

“‘Toews?’

The receptionist says it like a question, as if there’s anybody else in here. Johnny says, “Huh?” and then, “Oh, yeah. Uh. That’s me!”

“Through that door, down the hall, last office on the right. Mr. Shields is expecting you.”

Johnny stands in an ungainly creak of leather and rustling of fabric. The blazer was definitely too much, he should’ve pushed harder when his mom had thrust the garment bag at him. He pushes open the imposing door of heavy, polished wood, looming like some ominous portal to dark, mysterious places, and pauses.

“Down the hall to your right,” the receptionist repeats, blandly. “Last door.”

Johnny goes, but mostly just because turning and fleeing the building at this point would look really weird, and he’d have to hear about it from his mother tonight at dinner.

The other side of the door is more of the same tastefully oppressive theme, footsteps in his loafers swallowed up almost instantly by the immaculate cream-colored Persian runner that stretches down a hall of closed doors, alternating with more black and white nature photography. It’s lit by recessed fixtures, warm and dim.

He pauses in front of the last door on the right, taking a deep breath in a futile attempt to calm his nerves, and knocks. “Come on in!” calls a man’s voice, so Johnny does, and is almost immediately blinded.

After the muted waiting area, and the dim hall, the corner office bathed in sunlight makes his eyes water. He stammers, “Uh, Mr. Shields?” as the guy behind an enormous glass desk gets up to shake his hand.
“Yeah,” says the guy -- Mr. Shields, grinning. He has a naughty-schoolboy smile and tastefully untidy hair, but none of that seems to diminish the sort of lazily-imposing thing he’s got going on. Johnny can see why his mom likes the guy. “Sorry, I know it’s kind of a shock after the crypt out there,” he waves a hand over Johnny’s shoulder to indicate the hallway. “The lights around here put me to sleep, and I like to actually see where I am, y’know?”

“Uh-huh,” Johnny says, stupidly. “I mean, yeah, no, totally.” Jesus fucking Christ, when did he start sounding like such a kid? “Um, I mean. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

Mr. Shields gets another of those grins, letting go of Johnny’s hand and going back to sit behind the desk. “No problem at all! Your mom speaks really highly of you, she said we’d have a lot to talk about. Take a seat, take a load off.”

“She...did?” Johnny asks, taking the seat opposite the desk. It’s another expensive-looking leather number, and he has to use all the muscle his quads’ve got not to slip right back off again.

“Sure!” Mr. Shields’ enthusiasm is infectious. Johnny can actually feel himself relaxing by increments the long he’s exposed, and he’s not sure how good a plan that is. He gets an inane flash back to some nature program he watched with Pat over a year ago, where the big, toothy fish lulls the trusting little reef guppies into a false sense of security with a pretty, dancing light. Not that Mr. Shields seems all that menacing. “Did she tell you I played triple-A in high school?”

“Wait, seriously?” Johnny says, unable to help himself. “Around here?”

“Back east,” Mr. Shields says. “We won gold in our division my senior year.”

“I play for Madison,” Johnny says, and Mr. Shields nods excitedly.

“Your mom told me. Congrats on the championship in June!”

“Thanks.” Johnny grins, in spite of himself. “So then, you play in college?”

“Some,” Mr. Shields nod. “I had a scholarship for the first couple years, but then it just kinda turned into a lot, you know?” Johnny doesn’t, but he nods, anyway. “It was great, though. Lots of fun.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says, for lack of a better idea. “Cool.”

“So,” Mr. Shields says, seeming to come back to himself and leveling with Johnny across the desk. “Your mom said you might be interested in an internship with me. She said you were thinking about business school.”

“I--” Johnny has to swallow down a about a dozen seriously rude responses to this. It’s not Mr. Shields’ fault his mom is trying to play them both like puppets. “Well, I guess it’s one of the options I’ve thought about.”

Mr. Shields gives him a shrewd look. “It’s something you’ve thought about, because you’re actually interested, or because your mom keeps bringing it up?”

Johnny feels himself flush. “Uh. Well...maybe a little of both?”

“Fair enough,” Mr. Shields laughs. “So you are genuinely interested?”

Johnny pauses. In his head he can hear Segs, and his friends, and his brother all calling him a kiss-ass and telling him how boring he’s being when he says, “Yeah, yeah I think so. I want to give myself options, you know?”
“Good man,” says Mr. Shields. “You got a resume on you?”

Johnny ducks his head, cheeks flushing again. “Um, not exactly. I’ve never really had a--”

“No problem,” Mr. Shields says, smoothly. “That’s the point of internships, right? So you’ll have something to put down when you really do need a resume. You’re captain of your team, though, right? How’re your grades?”

“Oh.” Johnny’s getting really sick of feeling this far off his game. “Yeah, I am. And, um. Not bad. I got all A’s this past semester.”

“No bad,” echoes Mr. Shields, with a smirk. “So modest, to boot. I’m impressed. How do you feel about doing menial gruntwork? I can’t offer you anything super exciting here, but it’d be a step in the right direction if you’re seriously considering an MBA program in the future.”

“Wait,” Johnny says, “so you’re offering it to me? Just like that?”

Mr. Shields laughs. “I don’t know about just like that, but sure, yeah. I trust your mom’s judgment, and I don’t think she would’ve thrown you into this if she didn’t really think you had what it takes. And now that I’ve met you, I’ve seen enough to have a good feeling.


“Mostly you’d be doing a lot of observing,” Mr. Shields continues. “I won’t try to con you into believing it’ll be terribly exciting. But I’ve got a handful of junior associates here who are managing low-level accounts and they could use the help with filing and making calls and scheduling and the like. Think you could handle that?”

“Sure,” says Johnny, wondering what the hell ‘low-level accounts’ even are, and what about them would need to be scheduled. “It sounds like good experience.”

“That’s the idea,” agrees Mr. Shields. “So, when would you like to start? You’ve still got almost a month before school, right?”

“I--” Johnny starts. He means to say, could start whenever, but what comes out is, “need to think about it.”

Mr. Shields looks taken aback, but he rallies on a dime. “Sure,” he says, getting up. Johnny does the same, and shakes the hand Mr. Shields offers him. “Sure, I look forward to hearing from you. But make it pretty quick, okay? I’ve got three more intern interviews next week.”

“Yeah,” Johnny says again, gratefully this time. “I’ll get back to you really soon, I promise.”

“Looking forward to it,” Mr. Shields says. “And hey, congrats again on the title.”

Johnny sees himself down the hall back into the waiting area, where the receptionist doesn’t even look up from his computer to wish Johnny a nice day as Johnny beelines it out toward the elevator bay. He digs his phone out from the pocket of his stupid, slippery pants, staring stupidly at the screen a moment before bringing up Tyler’s number and pressing call.
It rings. And rings. And goes to voicemail.

“Hey, man,” Johnny starts, and then falters, feeling stupid. “Uh. So, I just wanted to give you a call and say hey, and...fuck, I dunno. Call me back.”

He hangs up, seriously resisting the urge to bang his head against the wall as he waits for the elevator to arrive. *Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

The doors ding open, and he gets in, avoiding his own reflection in the plate glass mirror lining the interior. It’s not until he’s reached the lobby, reemerging out into the bright, noisy, midday downtown bustle that his phone vibrates in his pocket. It’s Looch.

“Hey!” Johnny says, genuinely surprised. “What’s up? I thought you were still off at that thing with Davy and his family.”

“I am,” Looch says. “Where the hell are you? It sounds like an airport terminal.”

“Downtown,” Johnny says, grimacing as he ducks back through the revolving door and into the relative quiet of the deserted lobby. “Sorry, is that better?”

“Yeah,” says Looch. “So hey, Segs just texted me. What the fuck, man. What’re you doing to him?”

“I...what?” Johnny asks, genuinely confused. “What’re you talking about?”

“Dude.” Looch sighs, and Johnny almost laughs at how vividly he can picture Looch’s expression. The long-suffering *why do I have to explain everything to you kids* one Johnny’s used to seeing cast at Segs, not *about* him. “He’s totally into you, and you’re stringing him along. D’you have any idea how hard it is for him to admit he legitimately *likes* someone? Let alone a dude, and *seriously* let alone a dude who is you. Don’t be a douche.”

“Hey!” Johnny says, indignantly. “I am not leading him on! He’s the one who left from skating the other day and told me to get my shit together and call him, or whatever! I thought that meant he was kinda over it, or something.”

“Oh my god,” Looch groans. “You guys fucking deserve each other. But, okay, you’re wrong. He’s totally stupid about you, to the point of texting *me*, asking for advice. Even though I told him that you and me were just fooling around, and all his big, shmoopy feelings are on a totally different level.”

“Look, I honestly had no idea he felt that strongly,” Johnny says, sighing. “I was actually more worried about just being some kind of experiment for him, or something, you know? *I didn’t want to get attached to someone else who didn’t know how to attach back.*”
“I get that,” says Looch, sobering. “That’s fair. But if you go through life treating every viable option like Pat 2.0, you’re gonna be really fucking lonely really fucking quick.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “Yeah, I know.”

“Take a risk, once in awhile. Worst comes to worst, you’re still eighteen and hot and captain of a hockey team. At least you know with those credentials you’ll always be able to count on Carey Price.”

“Oh my god,” Johnny groans. “Oh my god how do you even--”

“Dude, there are a bunch of us, but there aren’t that many of us,” Looch says, snickering. “Gay hockey grapevine works fast. And anyway, anyone who knows anything would probably just assume, anyway.”

“Great,” Johnny mutters, as Looch just laughs harder.

“How’s it feel to have shared dick with Bergy?”

“Are you-- What? Oh my god,” Johnny groans. “No, shut up, I don’t want to know. We’re never going to talk about this again. Didn’t you call me to yell at me about Segs? Could we get back to that?”

“Fuck,” Looch wheezes, “fuck, you’re right. This is so much more fun, though! Shit, I wish I coulda seen your face just now.”

“Hanging up no,” Johnny tells him.

“God, buzzkill. Fine.” Looch huffs, sobering. “Take a minute to think about it if you need to, sure. Either try with him for real, or let him down easy, but dude, make a decision already.”

“Yeah,” says Johnny. “Yeah, okay. And hey, it was nice to hear from you, even if it was just you being a dick.”

“You say the sweetest shit,” says Looch. “Okay, gotta go. I’ll talk to you when I get back in a couple weeks, we can hang out.”

“Definitely,” Johnny says.

He hangs up and pushes back out the revolving door onto the sidewalk. It’s past one, now, and most of the lunchtime bustle has abated. He wanders toward the train back home turning the conversation with Looch over in his head. The urge he’d had to call Segs after the interview seems confused and muddled now, and his own indecision dogs him even worse than the idea of either choice.

Johnny’s never been a risk-taker. He’s never had to be. Things’ve always just kind of happened for him, and he’s never given it too much thought until recently. He got into hockey because he’s good at it. He stayed with Pat because everyone said they were perfect together, what a modern-day fairytale. He got to be public about it because he had a bunch of grownups with actual influence willing to go to bat for him. His mom.

Actual influence.

For everything Johnny’s accomplished, he suddenly feels terrifyingly detached from most of the major decisions in his own life.
He swipes his pass to the trains and joins the trickle of people making their way down to the platform, phone bouncing against his leg in the pocket of his weird, slippery pants.
The air is crisp and cool and hinting at autumn as Geno follows Patrice and Marchy through the low
scrub grass where it starts to slope down toward the water. The wall of trees behind them loom tall
and heavy in silhouette, the evening breeze sending leaves skittering and wafting across their path. In
front of them is the lake, enormous and black under a thin-sliver moon.

Marchy yells, “Play nice, guys!” as he skids down the sandy embankment, toward where what looks
like about half the league is sprawled across the wide, pebbly beach. He’s swallowed up amongst all
the other milling bodies in the dark, all moving around an enormous bonfire throwing up sparks a
couple dozen feet into the air like innumerable chaotic planets around a bright, warm sun.

Patrice grimaces, laughing ruefully as he pauses to wait for Geno at the crest of the embankment.
“Man, I was kinda hoping he’d forgotten.”

“Well, right,” says Geno, glancing back over his shoulder at the long rows of cars parked against the
treeline. It seems like they were just here, at the same time as it feels about ten lifetimes ago. “Marchy
never letting go of reasons to give shit. Too bad we all grown up and better than that, now.”

“What, you don’t want me to punch you in the face for old time’s sake?” Patrice snickers. “You
sure?”

“Sorry,” Geno says, sadly. “Romance all gone.”

Patrice says, “Oh, I dunno.” He loops arms around Geno’s neck, leaning up to kiss him slow and
deep, and Geno realizes suddenly that Patrice doesn’t have to stand on tiptoe to do this, anymore.

There’s a throat-clearing behind them and they slide apart, both blushing, to see Johnny Toews
behind them on the path, hands buried deep in the pockets of his letter jacket. He grins. “God, get a
room.”

“Whatever, hypocrite.” Patrice kicks some sand at him, grinning. “You’re late, too?”

“Wasn’t sure if I was gonna come,” Johnny admits, making a face. “I mean, last year was just so
great.”

“Oh shit,” Patrice winces. “Right. That’s when Pat, uh.” He falters, looking anxious, but Johnny just
rolls his eyes.

“Decided to be a giant bag of dicks, yeah.”

Geno glances confusedly between the two of them, and Patrice mutters, “The girl, remember? I told
you before.”

Johnny shrugs. “Yeah, well. Ironically I just came because I need to talk to Tyler.”

“Talk to-- Oh.” Patrice looks like he really wants to ask, but he just nods. “He should be here, somewhere. Marchy took off a few minutes ago to find him and the rest of the guys. C’mon.”

He leads them all down the embankment and out onto the flat expanse of pebbles and sand, packed down even flatter by the footprints of several dozen teenagers. Johnny matches step with Geno, glancing sidelong at him as he asks, “So, I hear you’re boarding at Consol next year?”

Geno looks over at Patrice, who makes a big show of looking around for their friends and doesn’t seem to notice him. “Yeah,” says Geno. “I’m moving in next week.”

“Oh, cool, I’ll probably see you,” Johnny says. “We’re moving my shithead little brother back into the dorms, too. Assuming Mom doesn’t find a reason to send him away to military school or something before then.”

Geno’s not really sure if this is a joke or not, but Johnny’s actually grinning, so Geno smiles and nods.

“He’s never gonna have any time,” Patrice groans, from Geno’s other side. “It sucks.”

“We were fine last year,” says Geno, placidly. “Now you just spoiled because summer. You doing ten million things, too. Maybe we just start sending letters all day, like in old-fashioned war time. Very romantic.”

“You aren’t funny,” Patrice informs him.

They round a group of tables covered in booze and snacks on the far side of the fire to find most of the Causeway guys, flopped on blankets or horsing around with a glow in the dark frisbee.

“Catch!” yells Segs, flinging it in their direction. He halts mid-step, face doing something weird when he sees Johnny. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hey,” says Johnny, as Patrice looks back and forth between them like his neck is on a swivel. “Uh, can I talk to you real quick?”

Segs looks reluctant when he says, “Sure.” But he goes, following Johnny off down toward the water and away from most of the crowd as Patrice and Geno watch them go.

“Been here long?” Johnny asks, once they’re far enough down the beach that they can speak without shouting.

Segs shrugs, toeing the sand. “Nah, maybe half an hour. You?”

“Just got here,” says Johnny. He shifts foot to foot, feeling stupid and awkward. “I’m glad I caught you, I wanted to talk, like, in person.”

“Oh.” Tyler’s expression flickers, something like disappointment reading for just a second before going back to flat. “Kay.”

“Dude…” Johnny isn’t really sure what to say, or how to say it. His nerves are doing a conga in his stomach when he finally just sucks it up and says, “You still want company on that roadtrip?”

“I--” Segs’ eyes go wide and his mouth hangs open a second. “Seriously?”

Johnny shrugs. “If you want me there, yeah. I’d be super into it.”
“Really?”

“Really really,” says Johnny. He grins hesitantly, and after a moment, Segs grins back.

“I’m leaving tomorrow afternoon, though. You cool with that?”

“Shit,” Johnny says. His stomach gives another lurch, but he nods. “Hell yeah. But only, um,” he hesitates, forcing himself to look at Tyler’s face, “only if we try dating for real. Like, not as some low-key whatever, but where our friends know and shit isn’t all weird.”

Segs hesitates, and for a moment Johnny’s heart plummets right down into his shoes, but then, “Yeah, okay,” says Segs. “I think I could do that.”

“Really?” Johnny asks, more sounding more incredulous than he’d meant to.

“Yeah,” says Segs, a little defensively. “What? You thought--”

“No!” says Johnny, quickly. “No, no, that’s great! I just wasn’t sure, I mean. Whatever. Hey, cool.”

“Cool,” Segs echoes, smirking a little. He pauses a moment and then pushes forward into Johnny’s space, kissing him full on the mouth.

Johnny melt into it. He’d been so busy with his mingled anxieties anticipating this conversation that he realizes he hadn’t even bothered to consider a positive outcome. One where he gets to make out with Segs whenever he wants, even on a crowded beach covered in their teammates and--

Up the beach by the Causeway encampment, somebody wolf-whistles. There’s mingled voices hooting and shouting, and Johnny and Segs pull apart both blushing dark in the low light.

“Shut the fuck up!” Segs yells over his shoulder, as Johnny gives everyone the finger. He mutters, “Hey, you wanna take a walk or something?”

“Or something,” Johnny smirks. He tangles their fingers together and they wander off down the sandy curve where it narrows further away from the main beach.

They only make it a few paces, however, before there’s hurried footsteps behind them and someone calls, “Hey, wait up a sec!”

Patrice and Geno reemerge out of the gloom, Geno looking apologetic while Patrice is beaming.

“Sorry,” Geno says, “I try to tell him wait, but--”

“But whatever, you guys can go get sand in your underwear in a minute,” Patrice cuts him off, waving a dismissive hand. “What the hell, is this a thing? Like, a thing that’s actually happening?”

He glances gleefully between Segs and Johnny, and Johnny has the burning desire to toss him into the lake.


“Let me be happy for you, dickbag,” Patrice tells him, sticking his tongue out when Segs makes a face. “Not that you deserve it.”

“Johnny’s going on the roadtrip with me,” says Segs. “We’re just, um. You don’t gotta make a big deal, or whatever.”

“You guys dating is kind of a big deal,” Patrice says, huffily. “Although I don’t know whether or not
to be more or less concerned about your collective wellbeing on a cross-country roadtrip.”

“I think someone told him he was funny once,” Segs tells Johnny, ignoring Patrice’s splutter of indignation. “Like, in third grade. He took them seriously and it’s been a trial ever since.”

Johnny cracks up as Patrice shoves Geno’s arm. “Well, aren’t you gonna defend my honor or some shit?”

“Nah,” says Geno, wrapping arms around Patrice and hauling him back. “Don’t wanna get reputation for fighting at parties.”


“Well, uh,” Segs says, glancing at Johnny. “We leave tomorrow, so we gotta go plan the trip, and stuff.”

Patrice snorts and Geno’s eyebrows quirk as the corner of his mouth twitches.

“Sure,” says Patrice. “You go hang out at the end of this dark, empty beach and plan your roadtrip. We’ll see you when you get back.”

They turn and wander back off in the direction of their friends. Johnny watches them go, and then turns back to look out over the water, the endless black on black out to a distant horizon where the stars seem to fall in and get swallowed up by the swells. It’s beautiful and intimidating and raw all at once, and Johnny thrills with the hugeness of it; the enormous possibility stretching out in front of him, and the anticipation of the unknown.

Segs says, “Hey, you good?”

He stands at Johnny’s shoulder, following his gaze into the nothingness -- the everythingness -- and Johnny finds his hand, tangling their fingers together again as he grins.

“Yeah,” he says. “Yeah, I am.”

--The End--

Chapter End Notes

HOLY CRAP THAT WAS REALLY REALLY LONG.

Damn, y'all, thank you SO MUCH for sticking around and making the (literally) years of work that went into this thing feel amazing and super worth it and rewarding. I can't say how much I've lived for all your comments and kudos, or even just the hit count ticking up. If you haven't commented yet but you've been thinking about it, GO FOR IT! I love hearing from you guys!

There are a couple of you regulars that were so, so great through this whole process and I'm gonna miss you, so please, if you feel so moved, hit me up on Twitter and say hey any time. :))) @Illookalive
To every single person who makes it here to the end, thank you, you're the reason stories get written and fics get posted.

Good night! <3

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