### Between the Sacred Silence

**by** SecretGeniusShittyKnight (augopher)

**Summary**

When Whiskey arrived at Samwell University, he wasn't sure what to expect. He assumed he remain the quiet kid he'd always been, but little did he realize that the boisterous group of guys he played with on the men's hockey team would find ways to get under his skin and coax him out of his shell...one of them in particular.

**Notes**

Title comes from “Toxicity” by System of a Down

I do not own these characters. All except characters, Vovó Dorotéia, Holster's Nemesis Thad, and minor OC's who are my original creations, come from Ngozi Ukazu's lovely webcomic Check Please!

This fic has a soundtrack which will be updated with each additional chapter that can be found on 8tracks here

**Important trigger information:** There is discussion of past child abuse, domestic abuse and its effects in the form of PTSD. I have done my best to research and treat the topic with respect and care. Though all the trauma occurred in the past, it is still mentioned and some bits may be discussed in detail. It is relevant to how I have written the character and his backstory. I have tried to handle the difficult topic in a manner that does not in any way glorify abuse. The fic is not all gloom and doom and is ultimately a happy fic about healing and growth. Please read carefully.

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See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

Rafael stared out the train window, watching the scenery fly by in a blur. Activity bustled all around him, but he was too engrossed in the passing landscape to notice. Perhaps more accurately though, it was nerves that had the bulk of his attention. As it was with any new place or experience, he wondered if college would be different. Would he be accepted right away, or would he struggle with bullying until they realized he was just like them even though he couldn’t hear them?

For just once in his life since he was eight years old, he prayed it was the former.

“Relax, Rafinha,” his grandmother, Dorotéia, or Vovó D, as he called her, said after grabbing his attention and he turned his face towards hers so he could read her lips while she signed. That was their thing, signing. When he’d healed enough to be pulled out of the medically induced coma, and was given a passing grade from neurology, he found that Vovó D had hired a private ASL instructor to come, first, to his hospital room, then to his room in the inpatient rehabilitation center, and then each afternoon to her, well their, apartment in the Bronx and teach both of them. Recently, they’d both started learning BSL, or Brazilian Sign Language. It had been fun.

Yet, for all the strides he’d made since, back then he’d awoken in a hospital bed terrified and confused by the silent world around him. Still, that little bit of structure helped get him back together faster than he imagined would have happened otherwise.

Like a fish to water, he took to lip reading, surprising even himself with the ease to which he picked up the skill. So by now, he only signed as a secondary means of communication, because proficient or not, lip reading was not 100% accurate, and to be honest, he’d been speaking for a lot longer than he’d been signing. Though he’d found it useful in school to have an interpreter in language heavy classes like English or History, where more lecturing happened, he didn't really
pay much attention to his interpreter in classes like math, where he could read the board and learn from example problems.

“You’ll be okay. They’ll love you just like all your other teammates did.”

He nodded in assent, but he wasn’t so quick to believe her. Sure Samwell University had the reputation for being immensely progressive when it came to LBGTA+ students, but how would they fare in their treatment of students with disabilities? Less progressive, he reasoned.

So, as the Connecticut landscape continued to fly by out his window, and Vovó D left to head to the commissary car to pick them up some lunch, he tried to quell his nerves.

It didn’t work.

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Rafa continued to unload his things from the taxi while his grandmother went inside to fill out all the required paperwork to get his dorm keys. Strange, he thought. He was nineteen, almost twenty; he could sign his own paperwork, but then again, seeing as Vovó D was the one who would be responsible for paying for any damages and tuition expenses that his scholarship didn’t cover, he guessed it was okay.

That is, until he came to stand at the front desk inside Harrison Hall. The student working the desk, seemed flustered by all the activity. Apparently, today was move in day for the athletes at Samwell, and all of the freshman housed in dormitories lived in this hall. She, it appeared, was the only person scheduled to work move-in.

She read down her sheet. “Ah, you’ll need to head over to the Accessibility and Accommodations Office to pick up his adaptive tech, which includes a flashing light doorbell and vibrating smoke alarm,” she said to Vovó D, not even looking at him, but he could see enough of her mouth to understand. “That’s where he’ll select his interpreters as well. If he needs any additional help, please have him check with them.” As she continued on explaining dorm rules to his grandmother, Rafa grew increasingly more frustrated at the way she would turn her head away from him. If it weren’t for Vovó D’s signing, which she did as second nature by now just like he did when he spoke, he wouldn’t have picked up anything from the conversation at all.

Finally, after about two minutes of her pretending he didn’t exist, he snapped, “He is standing right here, and he is not a child, nor does he like being talked about in the third person!” Rafa snapped. If there was one thing he hated most about dealing with hearing people, it was when they assumed that since he was deaf, that he was also a child or worse, stupid. When they talked to his interpreter or his grandmother instead of him, it pissed him off.

Her expression turned sheepish when she handed him his keys and welcome packet, which he took and tucked into the front pocket of his suitcase before grabbing the handles of his luggage and rolling them down the hall to the elevators, grumbling under his breath the entire time.

When the elevators closed, giving them privacy, his grandmother turned to him. “I know she was being rude, but I don’t think it was on purpose.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh, the elevator ride already setting him on edge. “I know. I just...I get tired of being treated like my deafness means I’m mentally deficient or incapable of doing things for myself.”

She rubbed his cheek. His discomfort in elevators was well-known by now. “I know you do, Rafinha. You are the hardest working, strongest person I know. However, patience has never been your strong suit. Remember, some people have no experience working with deaf or hard of hearing individuals. Unless they’re being ableist on purpose, a little kindness might go-”

“I know what you’re trying to do, Vovó, but don’t. You’ve been a saint, but you won’t ever experience how it feels to be treated that way the way I do. You don’t get to feel like even less of a person than you already did because of ableism. As if racism and queerphobia weren’t enough, right? Gotta throw that into the mix.” He took a deep breath while he balled his hands into fists and released them several times. “I’m sorry. That was rude of- I shouldn’t spea-”

She pressed a finger to his lips, halting his apology. “The world assumes you have no voice, don’t let them take it from you.” She brushed the hair from his forehead. “Don’t ever apologize for voicing your hurt, anjinho.”

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Rafa could feel Vovó D speaking, her words reverberating through his chest as she hugged him tightly. He knew she was aware he’d have no idea what was being said, but that the vibrations of her voice would comfort him. As she ran her fingers through the closely cropped hair at his nape, she could have been speaking utter gibberish and the effect would be the same.

When she pulled back, there were tears in her eyes. “You be a good boy, Rafa. Stay out of trouble,” she said. He knew it was only half joking.

It wasn’t like he just went looking for trouble. It just always seemed to find him, and try as he
might to overcome it, that nagging ‘what if?’ that fueled his temper would always be there scratching at the surface of his mind. ‘What if I had been stronger?’, ‘What if I had been prepared?’, ‘What if I had just done what I was supposed to do?’, ‘What if I’d had time to hide?’.

What if, what if, what if. It was there, ever-present and urging him to fight back in the way he couldn’t at eight years old.

It wouldn’t be the first time his anger came in the form of lashing out, and no amount of self-defense or martial art training to achieve discipline and balance would make that itch to hit back for once go away. He wasn’t a bad kid, never was, but such was the way of the world. It was cruel and often unfair. “You know me. I try.”

“I know you do.” She stared at him, caressing his cheek, brushing a stray hair off his forehead.

“My sweet, Rafinha, you look so much like my Lucy did.”

He gave her a sad and forced smile, knowing there was truth in her words. He had excellent eyesight, could see the strong resemblance to his mother, rest her soul. Though his mother’s skin had favored Vovó D’s warm brown skin, he was a much fairer shade of bronze. Still, it had to be excruciating for his grandmother to look at him and see her daughter sometimes, but she never treated him any worse for it. If anything, he felt it made her love for him more fierce.

She took a shuddering breath, hugging him again, reluctant to leave and take the bus to the train station back to New York. She stepped back to look at him, her eyes full of tenderness despite their tears. “When I think of how your-” She stopped and took a moment to collect herself. “How that evil man stole her from me, almost stole you, sometimes I scare myself with how much rage I still have. I may not practice anymore, but if I ever got the chance, I can’t say what I did to him would be very Christian of me. But, that’s for the afterlife to decide. Special place in hell for people like him.” She kissed his forehead.

He squeezed her hands tightly with his own from where they remained on his cheeks. “I don’t want...I don’t think I’m going to tell the team right away about being Deaf. I just want them to see that I can play first before giving them a reason to judge.”

“It took another five minutes to finish their goodbye, and he retreated upstairs to his room. Thank God he had a single suite. There was no way he wanted to deal with a roommate and have to explain that he needed the room as dark as possible in order to sleep, his eyes so attuned to any changes in light levels to make up for his lack of hearing. Nor did he want to be a jerk about offensive smells, but when you relied on your remaining senses to make up for the one you lacked, you needed to be strict.

With some work, he was able to get his doorbell installed and working. It was nice too. Just inside the door, he affixed the light to the wall, and it blinked every time the button was pressed. It came with a vibrating receiver too, should he be asleep, not facing the door, or in the bathroom that lie between his room and the one next door. The smoke alarm was similarly easy to install. With a couple special touches, the emergency alert stickers on both his door and window, he was ready to turn his attention to unpacking.

In the morning, he would begin his new life. No longer Rafael, the lone deaf kid at his high school. No longer Rafael, who was almost two years older than the kids in his graduating class. Here, he was just Rafa, and here things would be better.
His uniform sweater clutched in his hands, Rafa knocked on the open door to the coaches' office.

“Hey, Coach Hall?”

“What is it, Viscaino?”

He waited until Coach looked up before entering. “My last name is wrong on my jersey.”

Hall rolled his eyes. “Not again. First it was leaving off the second ‘N’ in Zimmermann’s name, now...did they put a ‘Z’ instead of an ‘S’?”

No, that was not what happened. “It's missing Ribeiro on my jersey.”

“I didn’t know you went by your full name. It's not common to put middle names on jerseys. I'm sure they just missed it.”

Rafa's brows furrowed in confusion. "No, my middle name is Thiago. I have two surnames and they should both be on my sweater.”

Hall pinched the bridge of his nose, his wrist covering his mouth, so Rafa couldn't tell what was being said, but body language gave a lot away. When he looked up, the expression on his face showed his confusion as to why Rafa was still in his office.

“Sorry. I didn’t quite catch that. Could you run that by me again?”

“Just wear the sweater for today, and I'll have them re-lettered by the end of the week. Sorry about that. I admit that it was my mistake. I'm so used to seeing double surnames hyphenated, I just assumed it was a middle name. I forgot that the Hispanic community sometimes has two last names without hyphens.”

He stifled his groan. It was a common point of misconception that he was all too happy to clear up. He was proud of his mother's heritage...his father's? Well, he didn't want to have anything to do with it. It was bad enough he shared half his genes with the guy. "Latino.”

“What?”

“Hispanic excludes Portuguese speakers. So Brazilian isn’t Hispanic; it’s Latino.” One day, he'd just let it go the way Vovó D was always telling him to. But what could he say? He tended to dwell on things.

“I did not know that. Thank you for letting me know.”

Back in the locker room, he dressed for practice, facing his locker. He'd just pulled his sweater over his pads when someone tapped on his shoulder, startling him half to death. As he turned around, clutching his chest in fright, he saw a couple of the upperclassmen, one ginger, the other in a state of zen to rival a monk standing in front of him.

“Sorry about that. I said 'hi' but like, the locker room is pretty loud,” the Zenmaster said. “I'm Derek, the guys call me Nursey.”

"Nice to meet you, Derek.”

“This is Will, or Dex,” he pointed to the guy next to him.

“I can speak for myself, thank you!” the ginger guy, Dex, snapped, his brows scrunched up, nostrils flared, and Rafa had to tear his gaze away from the way his indignation looked, for lack of a better word, adorable. Taller than him by a couple inches, he was at a perfect height for Rafa to get a full sight of the splatter of freckles all over his porcelain skin. Amber eyes glowered at his friend, but Will reached out and shook Rafa’s hand. “It’s Viscaino right?”

Rafa shrugged. “Ribeiro Viscaino but yeah. I’m Rafael, but my friends just call me Rafa.”

“Got a nickname?”

“No, just Rafa.” He didn’t want to tell them about being called Ribeye for as long as he could remember. Nothing quite like being given a nickname after a piece of meat to reduce you to your appearance only, and believe it or not that was the best nickname.

Nursey chuckled. “That's no good, tadpole. Viscaino...Visca...Whiskey. We're gonna call you Whiskey.”

Nursey clapped him on the back. “Excellent. Good to have you on the team.” He turned and headed out of the room, leaving Will standing with Rafa.

“If you don’t like it, or have a problem with being nicknamed after booze, tell him. We don’t want anyone to feel obligated to-”

“It’s okay.” Around him, he noticed the room clearing out. Someone must have called time.

As they walked from the locker room to the ice, he was pretty sure Dex was speaking, but the light in the tunnel was too dim for Rafa to make out anything on his lips, so he ignored him, nodding his head every so often to appear like he was listening.

Joke’s on you. I can never hear you

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“Dude, what the hell, man? It’s a scrimmage! What’s with landing a check after the whistle?” One of the juniors—Rafa couldn’t remember his name, something with a C—said with a shove, pushing him back against the boards.

Rafa shouldered him away and said, “Sorry. My bad,” the way he always did...by signing along with his words. He winced as he realized his mistake. Well, no sense in furthering the ruse. So he took off his gloves and continued his apology in both languages, telling him it wouldn’t happen again, that he would try harder to make sure to keep an eye on the coaches while playing.

This, didn’t seem to smoothe things over as well as he had hoped, and when his teammate (Cory?) gave him another shove, Rafa couldn’t help the way he flinched and put up his arms in front of his face. It was instinctual no matter how hard he’d worked over the years to try and stop the reaction. No, no, be assertive. Vovó D is always telling you to stand up for yourself and to not let anyone push you around again. He straightened his posture and moved into the other guy’s space just enough to get him to skate backwards. “Stop!” And then, instead of doing both, Rafa—for lack of a better term—told him off entirely in ASL.

His heart was pounding in his chest; his pulse raced. Getting into a fight the first day of practice was not how he envisioned his initial encounter with the team. He’d never done the tour back in January. He committed to Samwell because they offered him a full ride. That was what mattered to him most.

A movement to his right caught his attention, and he looked over to see Will approaching with caution. Then, he got quite the shock when Will began to sign. Are you okay?

Rather than answer him, Rafa turned his head away and nodded.

Confrontation was something he struggled with and had been struggling with for over ten years now. Maybe he’d “get over” it eventually, but he doubted it. If he was lucky, maybe he’d just learn to deal better. Ha. If only.

Dex tapped him on the arm. You’re hard of hearing, Deaf?

Yes. You know ASL?

I try.

Rafa sighed. “I’m sorry about checking him after the whistle. Clearly, I didn’t hear it. I lost sight of Coach and was too focused on the puck to notice play had stopped. I didn’t mean it.”

“But...why wouldn’t you tell the team that? We could have helped you,” Nur...Noser....ah hell what was his name again? Rafa hadn’t even noticed him skating up beside his defensive partner. Derek! That was it.

“I don’t need help!” He took a deep breath and screwed his eyes shut. “Sorry. It’s just...as soon as people figure out I’m Deaf, they treat me differently, like with kid gloves or something. They assume I’m helpless, non-speaking, or have an intellectual disability. I just wanted you all to see that I could play before I said anything, you know, let my skills speak for themselves.”

“So in the locker room, when we accidentally startled you...” Derek trailed off, and it was apparent to Rafa that he not only felt chastened but wasn’t sure how to interact with him.

“That was my mistake, guys. I’m usually pretty good about not turning my back to the action. Since I can obviously speak and read lips just fine, so long as you face me when you talk to me, I don’t need help most of the time. Low light gets tricky if I can’t see your lips, but I’m good. Just...don’t talk too fast and I do okay.”

By now, most of the team had gathered round. The big blonde guy...one of the captains...Holtzer?

- Fuck that nickname shit! He always hated them, had enough problems learning names as it was. Why couldn’t people stick with their names? Adam, the blonde captain, bumped shoulders with him.

“Don’t sweat it, kid. We got your back.”

“Good to know. Don’t call me kid. I’m not one, and unless you’re my vovó, I don’t like diminutives. I might be younger than you, but I’m older than all the freshman players and probably some of the sophomores.”
“Spend time in Juniors? Where'd they put you?” Adam asked. “They had me in Iowa.”

“Manhattan. First Responder's Memorial Children's Hospital. I wish it was because of junior hockey, but not being able to go to school for a year and a half while you adapt to new and exciting challenges sort of put a damper on graduating on time.”

The other captain, Justin (see how much better that worked?), nodded. “Anyone ever tell you that your level of sarcasm is on point?”

“In those exact words? No. But yeah, I know. Vovó D, that's my grandma, says I'm just like my mamãe.”

Coach Hall blew his whistle—this time Rafa was careful to notice—and practice continued. By the time it ended, Rafa’s legs felt like Jello. He hurried through his shower, eager to collapse face first onto his bed. For the first time since school started last week, he was actually grateful that he wound up without a lofted bed. Sure it cut down on floor space, but at least he didn’t have to climb a ladder.

Instead of hurrying back to his dorm though, the coaches snagged him once he’d dressed, for a quick chat. “While we understand your reasoning for keeping your disability from the team, we—”

“I can still play. I'm good. Please don’t kick me off the team; I can’t afford college otherwise.”

The bottom of his stomach dropped out. No, this was not happening.

Coach Hall held up a hand to stop his oncoming breakdown. “No. That is not what this is about,” he said, facing him, speaking slowly and making sure to enunciate clearly. “There is room in the team budget for accommodations. Would you like an interpreter for practices and games? You know to help with coaching instructions and referee interaction? There are signal lights that can be installed at Faber, around the glass that can be lit up at the sound of a whistle or stoppage in play. Now obviously, at away games that is not an option, but I will work with the other schools to see if they have any objections to positioning staff around the glass with a handheld light. We, Coach Murray and I, want you to feel welcome on the team. Would that help you feel more comfortable?”

Rafa blinked a few times as his brain worked to fill in the contextual gaps in the words he'd just read on Coach Hall’s lips. Once he’d had a chance to process what was being offered, he breathed a sigh of relief. “Yeah. That’s...well that’s a lot more than I got with any of my other teams. Thank you.”

“Do you… have a preference in interpreter? You know, male, female…non-bi-”

“No. Just younger. They tend to know newer slang and be a bit more open-minded.”

Alright, well give us a couple weeks to get the rink updated, but hopefully I can have a regular interpreter by the end of the week.”

Rafa thanked them again and went to grab his things from the otherwise empty locker room.

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To his surprise though, Will stood waiting for him outside the locker room. “Hey, Will.”

“You know, it’s okay to call me Dex.”

On instinct, he reached for the silicone medical wristband he wore, pulling on it and letting it snap against his skin a few times. “Is it okay, if I don’t? I’m not good with names, and trying to remember nicknames is actually harder for me.” How could he explain the torturous task of proper name recall he struggled with and not get into terms like blunt force trauma and brain damage? That way lay the path to being treated in ways he hated.

Will clapped him on the back. “Fine with me. Do you mind if I try signing along when I talk?”

Rafa shrugged. “No, I do the same thing out of habit now. Are you learning ASL for your language requirement?”

“No,” he chuckled, “my little sister, Hannah, was born deaf. So, the whole family has been learning it with her. She’s almost five, so I don’t have a lot of practice, being up here at school. You know?”

“Ah, your right hand should make the circle in the opposite direction when you sign college’. Like this,” he said and showed him the correct motion.

“Oh. Thanks, Whiskey. Hey, I have a question. Why do you call your grandma vovó? I’ve taken Spanish for years, and I don’t know that—”

“It’s not Spanish; it’s Portuguese. I’m Brazilian on my mom’s side.”

“Gotcha.” Will shoved his hands in his pockets. “I have another question, and I really don’t want it to sound as ignorant as it probably is, but I swear it’s an honest question not meant to be ableist or anything.”
Oh great. He’d heard that before. ‘No offense but…’ was one of his biggest pet peeves. “Go ahead,” he said with what he hoped was an exasperated sigh.

“So, it took Hannah awhile to start speaking, and she still struggles so much. But you...you speak great. Now that I know you’re deaf, I can’t really tell, because your voice sounds like you’re hearing, albeit a New Yorker with a cold, but a hearing one. What is your secret? Did you go to a community school or were you mainstreamed? It’s just, we don’t have a lot of money, and if there was a program you used that could help Hannah...”

And that was not what he’d been expecting Will to ask. Usually it was something like, ‘Wow, you are so articulate. How did you get so smart?’ as though not being able to hear made him totally brain dead. “Oh. I wasn’t born Deaf. I had eight years of hearing before I lost it. So, I already knew how to speak. Sorry, I’m not going to be much of a help there. But...I still have an accent? I haven’t lost it?”

“Yeah. I can totally tell you’re from New York, though not which part. You sound a bit different from Nursey who is from Uptown.”

Rafa laughed. “Really? He just doesn’t seem like an uptight rich kid.”

“Yeah, he’s big into being ‘chill’ about everything.”

He shifted the strap of his messenger bag. “I’m from the Bronx. Pelham Bay. It’s a nice neighborhood. I mean the Bronx can be a shithole in some places just like any borough, but our co-op is in a decent area.”

“I’m from Portland, Maine. Got any siblings?”

Rafa shook his head. “No. Just me.”

“And your parents, what do they do?”

A chill ran down his spine, and he found swallowing difficult. He needed to steer the conversation elsewhere, before he fell apart. Yet, found that for once, he didn’t want to evade the truth. Well, not entirely anyway. “Um…,” he carded his fingers through the hair on the left side of his head, the side he didn't dare shave. The raised scar and bump on his skull lay hidden by his hair. Scars...he hated all of them he had because of that night. Every.damn.one. All they did was serve as a constant reminder of everything he wished he could forget. His hand moved to squeeze at the back of his neck, focusing on his breathing. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, to get to know me, but I really don’t want to talk about my parents.”

“Bad relationship?”

You could say that again.

“Well… not entirely. My mom died when I was eight, and I just don’t like talking about it.”

“Oh. Sorry to hear that. Your dad, is he dead too?”

“No idea.” Lie. Total lie. Rafa knew exactly where the guy was, not that he cared one bit. The asshole was right where he belonged, which was upstate and completely incapable of touching him ever again. The knowledge of that, plus a prescription helped him sleep better at night.

He looked over to see Will blushing. “God, I’m sorry to have brought that up. I just forget that not everyone’s parents stay married. I mean my mom and dad were highschool sweethearts. I’m number three out of six kids. So, I- Sorry I made things sad.”

Yeah. No shit. “It’s okay.” “It’s okay? Really? Why not just say ‘Yeah, it is fucking sad. I miss my mamãe like hell every damn day. My chest looks like a freaking roadmap’? You fucking suck sometimes, Rafael. You know that?”

There would be time for personal castigation later.

“Still sorry though.”

Chapter End Notes

In all fairness, I am not actually if the accommodations mentioned by the coaches are things that actually are used. Research for ice hockey accommodations for Deaf or hard of hearing players really only yielded information about how to make helmets safer and more comfortable for players with cochlear implants. I couldn’t find anything about visual signals to help with ref calls. So I took a writer’s liberty with these, because honestly? The idea I came up with seemed pretty useful and effective, and if that is not how things actually work, I think it should.

Also...I am a tad confused by what I read regarding when it is appropriate to capitalize Deaf or not. If someone with personal experience would like to unmuddy the practice for me, please, stop by tumblr or leave a comment. I would really like to know.
Dex held tightly to the brown paper bag in his hand, the to-go cup of coffee sitting in a precarious position next to another in the carrying tray. He hurried to follow a fellow student in through the controlled entry without waiting to be buzzed in by the front desk.

What? He was bringing a teammate breakfast not breaking and entering.

Thanks to the student directory, he knew which dorm room he was in search of, and he took the elevator up to the sixth floor, his nerves working to unsettle him. Short-tempered and admittedly a bit of an asshole, it wasn’t often that Dex got along so easily with someone else so quickly. It wasn’t for lack of trying either.

He’d been picked on a lot since he was a kid, whether it was for his hair, his freckles, his family not having a lot of money...or Nursey just assuming he was a homophobic asshole just because his family was conservative. Look, he would be lying if he said he hadn’t grown up hearing his share of bigotry from various relatives, the occasional joke that he now knew to be just plain offensive. The point was, Dex had busted his ass to unlearn all that shit, to fight all that internalized homophobia that he never understood until Shitty brought it up in an aside about pro-sports culture. Before that, he just kept hoping...praying that the way he felt, who he was could change if he just ignored it long enough.

That moment had been like a strike of lightning to his repressed gay self. Sure, he wasn’t ready to come out to anyone yet. It was a work in progress, like so many things in life. But, he was getting there. And an important step on that journey was to embrace the feeling anytime he found himself punched in the gut by the sight of a beautiful guy who set his heart racing.

Which is how he came to be standing outside Whiskey’s door, finger nervously pressing the button for the LED doorbell. After a minute of no reply, he pressed again, briefly wondering if perhaps the guy wasn’t home. He was just about to press once more when the door opened, and Dex found himself face-to-face with a sleep rumbled Whiskey. Dex fought not to lick his lips at the sight of Whiskey’s low-slung basketball shorts or the tight, white tank top clinging to his skin. It took a Herculean effort to remain calm.

Whiskey rubbed his eyes and yawned, brows drawn together in confusion (it was damn adorable) as to why his teammate was standing at his door. “Will, what’s going-”

Dex held out his offering, looking anywhere but at his barely dressed teammate. “Here.”

He stared at the bag and cup of coffee. “Why…”

“It’s an apology breakfast. You know, for bringing up the sad stuff yesterday.” His attempt to sign along with his words was an utter failure. Clearly, he was going to need to watch some instructional videos or something, because this was just embarrassing.

“If you’re still learning to sign, I would either speak, or just sign. Not both simultaneously. It will only slow your progress,” Whiskey said and took the food and opened the door further to allow Dex to join him in his dorm room. “Anyway, you didn’t have to. You didn’t know I didn’t like talking about it. So...but thank you for breakfast.” He looked at the second cup in the drink carrier. “What’s this one for?”

“I didn’t know if you liked coffee so there’s, um tea in the other cup.” Dex rubbed the back of his neck. He couldn’t remember being this nervous in a long time, which was probably because he hadn’t actually had a crush on a guy in a long time. Immediate desire to get horizontal with one, sure, but actually liking the guy...well, it had been a while.

Whiskey crossed the room and took a container out of his mini-fridge. Then, he opened the cup of coffee and poured half of the coffee into another mug to make room before dumping a generous amount of cream into each cup. After the first sip, a small albeit pleased smile crept across his face. “I love coffee. Thanks.” The paper sack contained a blueberry muffin which he took out and set on his counter. “You eat yet?”

What? His confusion was allayed when Whiskey cut the muffin in half and put each piece on a separate plate. No, that’s for you. I wasn’t.

Whiskey waved him off and went back into his fridge. “Do you like cheese?”


He opened a bag and broke off a chunk of white cheese that he cut into quarters, placing two on
each plate. A bowl came out of the fridge next, and from it, Whiskey scooped two big helpings of fresh fruit onto the plates. Once he handed a plate and a mug to Dex, he lifted the table from where it was mounted onto the wall and opened it up onto the legs. Then, he gestured for Will to grab his computer chair over to the table. “You have some time before class?”

Yeah. I don’t have a class until eleven today.

“No, like this,” Whiskey said, repeating Dex’s signing, showing corrections where needed. “See?”

“Oh I get it. I used finish instead of next. So wrong tense, right?”

“Yes, hey, wanna stay and watch something with me?” Whiskey flopped down onto his bed, the only chair in the room otherwise occupied.

Dex nodded, walking around the room to take in his surroundings. Sure must be nice to be able to afford one of the super suites, a single at that. His roommate freshman year was a slob. He shuddered at the reminder. Thankfully, Nursey was a much better person to share a room with, even if they did bicker constantly. Whatever, it was an essential part of their friendship, helped keep him sane. When Dex noticed the kitchenette addition, he turned around. Do you cook? He was glad Whiskey couldn’t hear the the tone of envy in his voice.

“Yeah. Vovó D is a charge nurse in the ER, so she works late hours sometimes. She made sure I knew how to cook so I could feed myself when she wasn’t home for dinner. And anyway food is important to our culture. There’s this great market near our building, which has a good Latino section. There’s a butcher and cheese shop a block past that which has the best sausages and actually makes queijo fresco.” Whiskey shrugged, “I didn’t actually request this room though. Just, all the Super Suites are accessible rooms. Like you know, wider doorways, no lofted beds, extra handrails in the bathrooms, shower stalls you could roll a chair into, built in shower bench. It’s why they’re so hard to get into, because they’re reserved for students with disabilities first. I guess the housing department assumed I needed the accommodation. I don’t, clearly, but I’m not complaining though.”

Dex nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.” He continued looking around the room (which was twice the size of the double he and Nursey shared. A pale blue bookcase stood off to one side, its shelves filled with a combination of movies and books. Curious, he went over to glean an understanding of his new teammate. Dozens of graphic novels sat upon one shelf, and he walked his fingers along their spines. Batman: Year One, Daredevil/Echo: Vision Quest, Sandman boxed set, Batman: The Killing Joke, Watchmen.

On the next shelf down, Dex saw several books of sheet music. Perplexed, he turned to him, abandoning his attempts to sign. “So, I don’t mean this to be rude. I’m just genuinely curious. I know Deaf and hard of hearing people can enjoy music. Hannah likes watching concert recordings all the time. She says it’s neat to watch the musicians’ fingers move. Just...you have sheet music. How do you play an instrument if you can’t hear if you screw up, or to adjust the pitch?”

Whiskey smiled and came to stand beside him. “I don’t. I used to sing when I was a kid, was in church choir, took voice lessons. I love singing; I just don’t do it when anyone else is around. Um...I’m not sure what happened to my singing voice during puberty. I could sound like a dying cat for all I know.”

Dex covered his mouth to stifle the chuckle that escaped, but quickly removed it. “Sorry. It’s just...you can’t possibly sound any worse that Shitty does. Remember him? Lardo snapped at Tango when he kept asking all the questions about the guy?”

“Well,” Whiskey said, plucking a book from the shelf, “since I took singing lessons before, I can read music and remember what the notes sound like. So if I look at the sheet music, it’s like I can hear the song, because I can hear the notes in my head. I like music a lot, but it’s sure nice to be able to feel the beat too. I worked at a concert venue for two summers doing backstage work. It was awesome, ‘cause I got to see concerts every weekend. The stage would vibrate, and I could feel it through my whole body. It was magic.”

Dex smiled at his exuberance. That sounds pretty cool.

“If you have the opportunity, you should definitely take your sister to a show. I guarantee, she won’t care who is playing. It’s just a spectacle she’d enjoy.”

You are adorable. I could just- No, Will. Play it cool. You’ve had crushes on guys before that went nowhere. Remember? Don’t go head over heels until you know if he’s anything other than straight. Self-preservation is key.

In an attempt to refocus his mind, he returned his attention to the bookcase, taking note of the movies and shows to see what kind of things Whiskey liked. Superhero movies and shows seemed to be a common theme, but on the top shelf, a case lay open. He picked it up.

“That’s my favorite show. You ever watch it?”

“Switched at Birth,” he read aloud. “No. I never really got into those type of shows, the teen dramas.” He rolled his eyes.

He watched Whiskey’s brows draw together and wasn’t quite sure how to read the expression that
came over his face. “You should watch it. It’s really good. Has Deaf and hard of hearing characters...being played by actual disabled actors. Not hearing people for a change. It’s not just a ‘teen drama’,” he said, making quotations in the air.”

Before he stuck his foot in his mouth, Dex walked away from the bookcase and looked at the pile of various art supplies littering Whiskey’s desk. *Are you an art major?*

“Planning on double majoring in creative writing and art with an illustration emphasis.”

Dex regarded him for a while. Nothing about the guy in front of him screamed artist, and yet, as he pushed a wallet of brush markers out of the way—a wallet of high-end and expensive markers—to reveal a storyboard panel fully rendered and colored and...amazing, he found himself correcting his initial impression of him. “Wow! Did you draw this?”

Whiskey nodded. “Yeah. That’s for my introduction to illustration class. We have to create a panel from a fairy-tale.”

“So you want to like write graphic novels or something?”

“No. Not particularly. I want to write children’s books and comics for kids.”

That piqued Dex’s interest. His brother was a huge fan of superheroes. “Yeah? Superheroes? I noticed you seem to like them a lot.” He pointed to the bookcase.

“Yeah. You kidding?”

Dex set down the storyboard and took his seat at the table. “So who’s your favor—”

“Hawkeye and Echo,” Whiskey said without missing a beat.

“Really? That seems kind of...oh,” he said, recalling that time when he heard his brother complaining about movie version of Hawkeye versus the one seen in comics. “Representation is important, right?”

Whiskey smiled as he settled back down on his bed to continue eating his breakfast. “Yep. Echo is nice because she’s Deaf and Latina/Cherokee. I mean, that’s why I want to write. When I was a kid, finding books about kids like me was hard. So, since I am obviously not going to be a rock star the way I wanted to be when I was six, I can write the books I needed, and maybe they’ll help another kid.”

Dex fought to swallow his piece of fruit around the lump that had formed in his throat. *I bet you’ll be great at it.*

Whiskey reached over and grabbed a remote from atop his dresser/nightstand, switching on the TV that Dex hadn’t even noticed yet as it sat perched atop a stand at the end of Whiskey’s bed. He’d falsely assumed that Whiskey simply watched TV on his laptop the way most college kids he knew did. Though it wasn’t massive by a long shot, maybe only a 32” model at most, but his brain made the irrational leap from expensive markers, single dorm room, and flat panel tv to spoiled rich kid.

Now, there were many moments in Dex’s life that he wasn’t proud of, and years down the line, if you asked him about this one that followed next, he would say it was one he regretted immensely as soon as it happened.

“Must be nice to have Grandma spoil you with the fancy dorm suite and splurge on your TV. We can’t all have three hundred dollars worth of art markers and a BluRay player,” he grumbled when Whiskey pulled up Netflix. He didn’t even have a TV, let alone a smart one. He used the computers in the library to write his papers, and borrowed Nursey’s when he needed to work on a coding assignment. He tried not to let his family’s money troubles color his interactions with others, but it was so hard sometimes when he was surrounded by teammates who clearly came from wealth and he’d grown up on food stamps.

“What in the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He looked up to see Whiskey glaring at him, brows drawn together. How did he—

“If you didn’t want me to know what you were saying, maybe you should have covered your mouth... or you know, kept your damn mouth shut. Did you stop to think that maybe a smart TV might have more accessibility functions? That Skyping with my vovó would be easier on a larger, sharper screen so I could see her signs clearer? That the captions would also appear larger on a bigger screen and be easier to read from across the room? God, do you know how hard using the phone is for me? Even the best apps crash sometimes, and I absolutely hate calling a relay service, because I hate not being able to do things for myself. Even the TTY mode on my phone requires an additional device to use. The doorbells at home, the fancy visual smoke alarms, the service dog I needed until I was fifteen... Newsflash, adaptive tech isn’t cheap.”

Dex opened his mouth to apologize, but Whiskey stopped him, and it was only then that he saw the black silicone bracelet on his right wrist, the medical alert symbol visible front and center. He’d seen it yesterday at practice when Whiskey had taken off his glove but assumed it was one of those sport bands people sometimes wore. A metallic glint from the dresser caught his attention.

A similar band, this one made of stainless steel and designed to resemble a wrist watch, sat next his lamp.

When Whiskey noticed his line of sight, he covered his bracelet with his left hand, a slight pink flash spreading up his cheeks.
“Yeah, I wear a medical alert bracelet. So what? Can’t have EMS unaware I can’t hear or anything! And I’d hate to be subjected to an MRI and have metal pulled out through my skin. Would be horrific.”

“I-“

“Don’t. I know what your implication was, that I’m a spoiled rich brat. Well, I’m not. Okay? Vovó D thought a new TV would make me less stressed being away from home, if I had a comfort from home. For crying out loud, it was only a hundred bucks! I can’t play music in the dorms as loud as I would need to in order to be able to feel it through the floor. We’re not rich. There’s just two of us. It makes the money go farther. We own our Co-op, because the first landlord we had after I moved in, was an asshole who refused to let her make the necessary changes to the doorbell and wouldn’t install a video front door system so I can see who was buzzing. We own our apartment, because she had to sue the guy for violating the Americans with Disabilities Act. It gave just enough for a decent down payment. Don’t lump me in with entitled snobs who haven’t had to struggle a day in their lives.” His chest heaved in anger, and yet, his voice was a lot quieter than Dex would have expected for someone as angry as Whiskey seemed to be.

“You know nothing about me, Will! Just because she and I tried to make my college experience as equal footed as it could be, doesn’t mean you have to judge. I don’t need a side of guilt. What I need are friends.”

I’m sorry- He tried to sign but was cut off.

“Just go.”

It took him a good three minutes, approximately the time it took him to walk from Whiskey’s door to the lobby for Dex’s brain to process what had just happened. “Way to go, William,” he sighed. “Taking this chip on your shoulder to whole new levels of jackassery.” Once outside the freshman residence hall, he rapped his head softly on the brick wall. “Stupid, stupid, stupid.”

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Oh anjinho, you are too hard on yourself. It is perfectly fine if you are slow to make friends. It doesn’t mean there is anything wrong with you. - He read the captions for her words as they appeared on screen.

“I know; it’s just… I really thought Will was someone I could be friends with, but-“

She’d started the conversation by signing, but the connection was lagging, and so now he had to wait for her words to translate once more.

You said he has a sister who is deaf, and that he tries to sign with you. You get upset when people talk about you in the third person, and based on what you told me, he has made sure to face you when he speaks to talk directly TO you. Just talk to him. If, for nothing else, to get an explanation.

She smiled at him before speaking further. The seconds that ticked by while he waited for the text translation of her words were maddening. Look, I’m not telling you that you don’t have a right to be upset, Rafael. You do, of course you do. I just don’t want you to write him off as a friend just yet. People make mistakes, anjinho. As long as they learn from them, and apologize, it doesn’t mean they are a bad person. And if you read his lips correctly, which I believe you did, then he wasn’t commenting on your disability, just your perceived wealth. Maybe how you feel when people treat you differently because you can’t hear is how he feels about money. Perhaps he grew up bullied for it, and it’s a sore spot. It seems that people flaunting their wealth might be something that really bothers him.

Yeah, he’d considered that, which was partly why he was feeling so miserable at the moment. Class had been a disaster, the argument playing over and over in his head. Had he been too quick to jump on him? This type of thinking, the internalization of things was one of Rafa’s biggest personality flaws. He was aware of it, accepted it, and knew exactly where he got it.

He closed his eyes, willing away the intrusive memories of words like ‘worthless little bastard,’ ‘should’ve made her get rid of you,’ and ‘ruined my life’ being hurled at him. On instinct, his hands grasped at the edge of his comforter seeking purchase to ground him in the moment as his pulse skyrocketed. His breath started coming in short, shallow, and as the ‘noise’ in his head grew louder, he clamped his hands over his ears even though that wouldn’t protect him.

His cell phone vibrated next to him on the bed, and at some level, he knew it was Vovó D calling, but at the level closest to the surface at that precise moment, he was eight years old again. He scrambled back on his bed, yanking the weighted blanket off his desk and wrapping it around him.

“Alliteration, caesura, euphony, hyperbaton, metaphor, polysyndeton, synecdoche. Alliteration, caesura, euphony, hyperbaton, metaphor, polysyndeton, synecdoche.” No matter how many times he reciting his grounding mantra, his head still swam. At least he was still present enough to realize it. There had been plenty of times where he hadn’t been. Those were, and always would be, hell to face alone.
From atop his dresser, he grabbed his Grounding Kit and pulled it into his lap. Inside it were his many coping aids. He plucked out a textured ball that lit up when he struck it against his leg and ran his fingers over the raised knobs covering its surface. *Você está bem, Rafa. Está bem. Estás bem; você está seguro.*

It could have been minutes, or it could have been an hour as he sat watching the lights blink and flash. They reminded him of the twinkling lights on their Christmas tree back in the Bronx. It lent him a modicum of clarity. Eventually, his thoughts calmed. His mind cleared, and he came back to see Vovó D looking at him, her face filled with concern. He could read her sign for “Okay?” clearly.

He licked his lips and wiped his eyes before responding. “... um... yeah I don’t know yet.”

**Keep using your blanket. Do you have your dog?**

Paulo lay buried under his pile of blankets, and Rafa pulled him out, giving the stuffed bulldog a squeeze. Within moments, the comforting sensation of a simulated beating heart reverberated through the plushed toy. In high school, one of his friends had laughed, chirping him about still having a stuffed animal, but Paulo was a lot more than that.

It was hard for hearing people to understand just how lonely the world could be when you went through your day and everything around you, from voices, to cars, animals, and machinery, when the way you experienced life was filled with absolute silence. The way seeing mouths move, sending words you couldn’t hear in your direction, sometimes made you feel a bit disembodied as if viewing your world from some place outside of it. He supposed, that had he been born deaf, he wouldn’t find it as bothersome as he did. But there was something about knowing, remembering how the world should sound, and hearing none of it, that got under his skin.

For kids like him, who attended mainstream schools, the world could be an even more isolated place. It wasn’t as though Vovó D hadn’t tried to get him into a specialty school. He’d gone for a year, but he’d said, rather indignantly as he recalled, that he didn’t want to go to a special school that made him feel even more like an outsider. In hindsight, he should have stuck with the school for the Deaf, but what can you do?

The end result was a guarded young man who had a propensity to believe that anyone who showed a remote interest in getting to know him had an ulterior motive. Slow to let people in, and even slower to trust. It was a facet of his personality that he wished so desperately he could change. He clutched the stuffed toy tightly to his chest, and the combination of that simulated heartbeat and the heavy blanket draped around his shoulders felt as close to one of his grandmother’s hugs as he could get.

Rafinha, I’m off tomorrow, and I can be there in four hours. Just say the word.

“No,” he said, trying his best to give her a reassuring smile, “I’ll be okay.”

**Can I give you a piece of advice? I know I will never understand how it feels to be you, but it seems this teammate of yours truly wants to be your friend, and perhaps you could give him a chance to apologize or explain before cutting him off.**

“Yeah. I guess. I’m pretty tired now, so you mind if we cut this short?”

**Only if you are sure you’re through your flashback.**

Entirely? No, that prickling sensation of fear still lingered in his peripheries, but he was calm enough to deal with the rest of his grounding by himself. “Yeah. I’m good.”

He watched her fold down her middle and fourth fingers on her right hand so that her index and pinky pointed upward as her thumb pointed out to the side. Her lips moved in conjunction with the sign. It was a simple one that even a lagging internet connection couldn’t screw up. Then she held her hand, still in that position, over her heart.

“Eu amo você, também, Vovó,” he said with damp eyes as he ended the call.

After he rushed through his bedtime routine, he found himself snuggled under his blanket, clutching tightly once more to Paulo as he stared up at the ceiling.

Sleep did not come easily.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Translation for Portuguese used in chapter:

*Você está bem, Rafa. Está bem; você está seguro.* - You are okay, Rafa.

*You’re okay. You’re okay you’re safe.*

*Eu amo você, também, Vovó.* - I love you too, Grandma.

I also realized I'd used anjinho in last chapter and not translated it for you. Anjinho is a term of endearment, used often for children. It means angel, but with the diminutive ending of -nho/nha. Much like how Vovó D calls him Rafinha, which is the diminutive of Rafael.
Chapter 4

Track Listing:
“Dark Side of Me”- Coheed and Cambria

Rafa folded his arms across his chest as he stood there in front of the hockey house with the other four freshmen on the team as... Betsy? Bitt...

Frustrated and still on edge from his argument with Will two days ago, he was running on less than eight hours of sleep for the past two days. He’d spent all of his classes with his mind elsewhere wishing he was better at getting to know people, better at opening up, better at trusting, but then... anyone that went through what he did would be hard pressed to do better. He replayed everything he’d said to Will over and over in his head until his frayed nerves had become a ball of anxiety in the pit of his stomach by Friday.

The point was, he would rather be anywhere but here at the moment, standing shoulder to shoulder with guys he’d known less than a week, ones whose names he couldn’t remember and who hadn’t said more than three words to him. His fingers played with the cool metal of his bracelet’s clasp the way he did when he was nervous. Sometimes it helped... no that was a lie. It never really helped, but it gave his hands something to do, and that was what helped. Otherwise, he would bite his nails down to the quick. Never a good thing.

Rafa’s mind was a blur as the tour moved into the house. If someone gave him a quiz on what he’d seen, odds were, he’d probably fail it. The only things he did take notice of were the Golden Girls poster on the living room wall and the veritable shrine to Wayne Gretzky in the form of a life sized cardboard cutout standing in the corner. Someone had draped a bedsheet around him like a toga and made a laurel headband out of— Were those condom wrappers, and were they... use— Oh God he hoped not.


“Dibs are like the housing system. It’s pretty ‘swawesome.”

He couldn’t have read that correctly. “‘Swawesome?”

Chris grinned, his smile lighting up his face. “Oh that means cool! It’s like saying ‘So awesome’ but really fast. You’ll use it a lot!”

“Uh huh.”

When they moved down to view the basement, complete with an introduction of the bylaws— courtesy of Will— which was too dark for him to be able to see well enough anyway, Rafa retreated back up the stairs. He just wasn’t ready to deal with Will yet. Still, in the kitchen, there was pie, and it smelled amazing. There wasn’t enough space for everyone to sit at the table though, and the kitchen was unbearably crowded, so Rafa grabbed his plate and sought refuge on the back porch.

It was hard to explain the way a room could be so thunderously loud without being able to hear a single fucking thing, but it was true. The more crowded the space, the less room he had to breathe, and the more his remaining senses went into overload. His eyes could never decide what to focus on, his nose taking in too many scents at once. Even the subtle changes in temperature when someone stood too close to him, or the way wind from their movements made the hairs on his arm shift were too much sometimes. It made his head swim, made him dizzy, made him feel like he was drowning.

Across the yard, he saw noticed a garden, well-tended and thriving. When he finished the last bite of his pie, he set his plate down on the step and made his way over. For such a... dilapidated (for lack of a better word) house, the vegetable garden seemed oddly out of place. Safe from rabbits in multi-tiered raised beds, rows upon rows of vegetables were ready for harvest, and if he had to guess, Rafa would say the plot was about fifteen by twenty feet. It took up a good portion of the yard. Quite impressive.

He stopped to pluck a raspberry off the bush, wincing when his fingers caught a thorn. As he shook out his hand, he couldn’t help but smile at the care that had gone into planning and crafting the planter boxes, which were really more like troughs. Whoever had taken the time to build—with deft and skilled hands no less—had utilized the already large space to yield an even bigger harvest. Growing in the very top tier, which came up to his eyebrows, Rafa could smell the fresh herbs, even if he had to stand on his tiptoes to see into them. It wasn’t often that he, at six feet tall, was too short to see something. If he had trouble, he couldn’t imagine how annoyed Bitty was every time he had to climb the stool to get basil for a peach basil pie... if he made those.

Rafa really hoped he did.

Briefly, he wondered if he could ask Bitty to make Quindim. Though he was proficient in the kitchen, Rafa had never taken to baking all that much. Still, he’d be glad to offer assistance if the end result was that heavenly coconut custard that was his vovó’s specialty. Salivating at the thought, he could practically taste it.
Much smaller than the vegetable garden, a lovely bit of landscaping with asters, goldenrods, and lavender sat off to the side of the larger plot. A mix of bumble and honeybees, even butterflies flitted amongst the blooms, and he was drawn to the flowers. He approached with caution; a bee sting as a result of a sudden movement considered threatening was not something he desired. One bee flew by his face close enough for him to feel the buzzing of its wings on his cheek, and he held out his hand, palm up just to see what would happen.

As it turned out, it proved to be an inviting spot to land, because a bee lowered itself onto his skin and walked around his hand for a while, seemingly convinced that he meant it no harm, which was true. He’d never been afraid of bees even as a child, so used to seeing them flying from flower to flower on their balcony. When he was feeling particularly angry or frustrated back then, he’d retreat to the stillness of the outside and watch them buzz about for hours. It was serene, though he supposed not having to hear the sounds of traffic would make anything more peaceful.

A soft smile tugged at the corners of his lips as the memory of the sweet almost vanilla-like fragrance of the white flowers of Vovó D’s mandevilla laxa vine.

Their own little paradise, as she called it, had been painstakingly tended to with planters of lavender and mint screwed into the railings. No caipimentha would be complete without Vovó D’s freshly picked mint. Nevermind he wasn’t legally old enough to drink. She was a firm believer in sharing the occasional cocktail with him on special occasions. She said it would teach him to respect alcohol, and she was right. Unlike other guys on the team just itching for their first Kegster and a chance to get drunk away from their parents’ watchful eyes, he really couldn’t care less about getting smashed.

He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and looked over to see Will standing beside him. Instead of saying anything, Rafa simply raised an eyebrow at him. Will’s fingers began to move.

I’m sorry.

A number of less than kind words circulated in Rafa’s head, but held his tongue and kept his hands still.

Growing up, well money was tight, and we didn’t always have enough. Not enough money, not enough food. And I just... let bad experiences with rich kids… He sighed and rubbed his shoulders.

The swell of his chest as he inhaled and the slowness with which he exhaled mesmerized Rafa. The fluidity of the motion, the way Will’s whole posture rose and sank with each breath. It was as though every thought he couldn’t say was telegraphed in his body language.

I shouldn’t have said that. Will wrung his hands for a few moments. I’m sorry.

Another bee landed on Rafa’s outstretched palm, and he lay his index finger beside it and waited for its fuzzy legs to latch on before lifting his finger eye level. The bee walked onto the back of his hand and along his forearm before taking flight. Then, he did something quite out of character for him.

He opened up to someone other than his vovó.

After all, Will had just confided in him. Perhaps, showing him the same courtesy was for the best. Rafa licked his lips. “Afterwards, there was this one day I had a pretty rough time at PT. I had to relearn walking, because I couldn’t balance myself anymore. My right ear suffered some major damage to the inner ear that threw off my equilibrium.”

He watched a butterfly land on Rafa’s outstretched palm, and he lay his index finger beside it and waited for its fuzzy legs to latch on before lifting his finger eye level. The bee walked onto the back of his hand and along his forearm before taking flight. Then, he did something quite out of character for him.

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Will tapped him on his arm to get his attention and spoke slowly and clearly. “I’m sorry. Really. I think there is a lot we could learn from each other, you know? I could show you how to garden, and you—“

“Another bee landed on Rafa’s outstretched palm, and he lay his index finger beside it and waited for its fuzzy legs to latch on before lifting his finger eye level. The bee walked onto the back of his hand and along his forearm before taking flight. Then, he did something quite out of character for him.

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After all, Will had just confided in him. Perhaps, showing him the same courtesy was for the best. Rafa licked his lips. “Afterwards, there was this one day I had a pretty rough time at PT. I had to relearn walking, because I couldn’t balance myself anymore. My right ear suffered some major damage to the inner ear that threw off my equilibrium.”

He watched a butterfly land on Rafa’s outstretched palm, and he lay his index finger beside it and waited for its fuzzy legs to latch on before lifting his finger eye level. The bee walked onto the back of his hand and along his forearm before taking flight. Then, he did something quite out of character for him.

He opened up to someone other than his vovó.

Will tapped him on his arm to get his attention and spoke slowly and clearly. “I’m sorry. Really. I think there is a lot we could learn from each other, you know? I could show you how to garden, and you—“

“Another bee landed on Rafa’s outstretched palm, and he lay his index finger beside it and waited for its fuzzy legs to latch on before lifting his finger eye level. The bee walked onto the back of his hand and along his forearm before taking flight. Then, he did something quite out of character for him.

He opened up to someone other than his vovó.

Will tapped him on his arm to get his attention and spoke slowly and clearly. “I’m sorry. Really. I think there is a lot we could learn from each other, you know? I could show you how to garden, and you—“

“You did this?”

Oh don’t look so shocked. I’m good with my hands. He wiggled his fingers at Rafa. “Not only can I tell you how to bait and retrieve lobster traps, I have one hell of a green thumb; it helped feed the family. Now if only Bernice would have stayed out of the garden.”

“Bertie?” he asked fingerspelling it out to make sure he’d understood him clearly.

No. B-E-R-N-I-C-E , She’s my goat.

You have a pet goat?

Sure do. I got her when she was a kid for Christmas when I was twelve. I’d raised a goat for 4H the year before and won some ribbons. My dad thought I deserved a reward. She’s the best.
Love that goat.

“That’s…”

“Anyway, I stayed in town this summer,” Will said, switching to speaking rather than signing. “I worked at Barney’s Pub washing dishes, cleaning up the place. Old Barney let me stay in the apartment above the bar for only the cost of utilities. Gave me free time to build the garden,” he said, making sure to pause after each sentence to give time for Rafa to interpret the words he’d just read upon his lips.

It’s really impressive.

So, what do you say? Can you be friends with a jerk like me.

Rafa was quiet a bit too long, because Will turned and began to head back inside. “Wait!” He jogged after him. “I’m sorry, too.

Why are you sorry?

I can be... My vovó calls it self-preservation. My therapist, however, says I’m combative. I have to hurt first before someone hurts me. He left off the ‘yet again’ that was the full truth of that statement. Somethings were best unsaid, and Will didn’t need to have his day ruined by Rafa’s sob story.

Will waived to get his attention. Can you slow down? I don’t know what these signs mean. He duplicated the gestures that had confused him.

“Oh. This,” Rafa made the signs for both self and protect, “is self-preservation. More or less. And this is defensive, but I mean it as combative.” He showed him again. “Well, not exactly. It’s ‘very defense’. I didn’t need to lash out at you over that. Maybe set the record straight and move on, but I didn’t. So, yeah, I can be a jerk, too sometimes. Lifelong struggle, huh.”

“Yeah.”

“But yeah, I think we can be friends. I mean, I could really use one. Tony, he’s um, trying to get to know me. And it’s cool that his mom is Mexican so we can share a bit of similar culture, but he talks... really fast, and that’s after I ask him to slow down. You, though? You and I have something in common I guess, and I’d love to help you work on your signing so you can communicate better with your sister.” He watched all the tension leave Will’s body.

“Great. So, it’s probably like performed by the amateurs of the amateurs, but I saw a flyer on one of the bulletin boards in the Quad for a performance of Death of a Salesman that will have ASL interpreters. I thought, maybe you might like to go. Sort of my way of apologizing, and it will probably be useful for me as well.”

When?

Tomorrow afternoon.

That sounds fun.

Will’s eyes brightened with a mixture of relief and glee. “S’awesome. But I claim no responsibility if it turns out to be utter crap. I do not understand live theater at all.”

Rafa clapped him on the back. “Don’t worry. I won’t blame you. So... I couldn’t help but notice you have some weeds to attend to. Would you like some help? Maybe you could teach me to garden.”

“Yeah, I’d like that.” Will crossed the yard to the sad excuse of a shed and returned with a couple of kneeling boards and two pairs of gloves. Thanks.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Track Listing:

Scene 1: “All I Want”- A Day to Remember

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dex shoveled a spoonful of Frosted Flakes in his mouth, lethargically chewing as he stared bleary-eyed at Whiskey three seats down from him at the dining hall table the team had claimed as their own. He blinked heavy eyelids a few times and fumbled for his coffee, slurping a drink back with a sigh. In his sleep deprived brain, he tried to do the math and figure out if he could fit a nap into his gap between morning and afternoon classes.

If I skip lunch, maybe get a smoothie from Annie’s...and I run from my dorm to class...that’s like an hour. I could-

✮✮
William J. Poindexter's life lessons # 218 : Never listen to Derek Nurse when he insists that he doesn’t snore.✮

He did, and it was ten times worse when he was congested. Listen, Dex understood nasal congestion as a lifelong allergy sufferer. Hello, ragweed anyone? Beside him, Nursey coughed into his elbow.

“How the hell do you catch a cold in sixty degree temperatures?” he asked without thinking.

“Dex, you do know that’s not how the common cold works right?”

“Thank you, future Dr. Oluransi. Yes, Ransom, I do, in fact, know how a cold works. I was being- oh nevermind.” He waved them off and resumed his staring contest with Whiskey’s hands as the guy sat engrossed in his drawing and utterly oblivious to everything happening around him.

Long fingers belonging to large hands pulled a Micron in smooth strokes across a piece of bristol. Whiskey had a smudge of ink on his face, just above the small dimple on his cheek, and a dot of green marker on the back of his hand. Will was too far down the table to see exactly what it was that Whiskey was drawing, but he longed to get a better look, at both the picture and at Whiskey himself. He wanted to see and learn the parts that were kept locked away, not just superficial likes and dislikes, the good stuff, the things that made him tick.

You see, Dex was a rational guy, a logical thinker. He liked to think of people like sentient computers, and little aspects of personalities were pieces on a circuit board. So, beneath Whiskey’s mostly reticent exterior, there were capacitors, transistors, LED’s, and microprocessors, each a facet that made up all that was Whiskey. And Dex?

He was itching to get a look at every component, to learn all he could.

Tango got up from next to Holster and walked down to deposit himself in the chair across from Whiskey. “Hey, hey Whisk. Can I ask you a question? I asked Holster first but I wasn’t sure. So then I asked Ransom, who said the same thing, but now I think they’re messing with me.”

Tango waited several seconds for Whiskey to answer, and Dex decided to help the kid out by grabbing Holster’s pen off the table and scribbling on a sheet of paper before balling it up and tossing it in Whiskey’s direction. The ball bounced off his nose and landed on the table in front of him. Confused, he grabbed the paper and looked up to see Dex waiving at him. He held up his hands in confusion “What?”

Sorry, I aimed for your shoulder. Open it.

Using those same fingers that had been making practiced lines on paper, Whiskey carefully uncrumpled the ball and read.

Tango wants to ask you a question. Apparently, our captains are trying to mess with him. But I don’t think he noticed you weren’t looking at him before he started talking.

“Oh. Sorry, Tony. What did you need? Go slow though. Okay?”

Tango took a deep breath. “I asked Ransom and Holster first, but I am pretty sure they were kidding so... Why are you in a movie, but on TV?”

Whiskey blinked at him a couple times. “What did Holster say was the answer?”
“Well, he said that when TV first came out, they had a devi-” Tango continued to ramble in a stream of what Dex assumed was impossible for lip reading.


A pink flush spread across Tango’s cheeks.

“I’m sorry. I got excited. So, he said there was a thing that could make the actors small enough to fit on the television screen. That it would like clone and transport a copy of them from the studio into the homes of people watching. You think that’s true or was he just pulling my leg?”

As Whiskey read the transcription of Tony’s words on his phone screen, Dex fought back a chuckle at the way his eyebrows furrowed as though he was trying to gauge if Tango was, in fact, seriously asking that question. It was cute… oh no. Here he was, only a month into the school year and his crush was progressing as his dad would say, ‘quite swimmingly’.

He, on the other hand, would say he was on a collision course with his feelings. Next stop, head over heels face down on the floor.

“Tony, that is literally a plotline in Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. You know, Mike Teevee… the first person in the world to be sent by television? Ringing any bells? No? Okay, well no: That is not true and they were definitely fucking with you. Do you want me to tell ‘em off?”

“No?”

“No?”

“No,” Tango said, this time his voice more sure.

“So um…” Whiskey rubbed the back of his neck, stretching a little, and Dex was helpless to avoid the way his own pulse jumped at the long lines of corded muscle offset by the curl of Whiskey’s fingers. I think I’m developing a thing for hands… or necks… or both. Maybe it’s just a ‘Whiskey’ thing. Yeah, it’s probably a Whiskey thing. Goddamn is he pretty, “it has to do with the meanings of the prepositions in and on. ‘On’ means on the surface of. Hence you watch a program broadcast on the surface of the television. Yeah? With me so far?”

Tango nodded rather, and Will decided it made him look like an overeager puppy.

“And ‘in’ means to embed within. So like, you’re filming a movie right? And your scenes are recorded and distributed. The images are inside the film, not just on the surface. Am I making any sense at all?”

“That… makes total sense!” Tango held out his hand, which Whiskey gave a high-five without hesitation… or looking. Well, at least those two were getting along. It made him happy to know Whiskey was opening up to someone else as well.

Whiskey turned to Dex. “Really? A ball of wadded up paper? How original, Will. If you really wanted to flirt with me, you could have given me flowers. I loooove flowers. Plumeria’s my favorite.”

That shit-eating grin on Whiskey’s face as he chirped dex? Absolutely maddening.

As he waited for his phone to display what Chad had just said, Rafa groaned, “You know how at

Sprawled out on a blanket in the middle of the Lake Quad, his phone beside him with Live Caption running, Rafa turned the page on his copy of On the Road. He contemplated whether the library would mind him standing and chucking the book right into the sewer where he felt it belonged. Ugh what a bunch of patronizing bullshit. Movement on his phone screen caught his attention and alerted him to the other members of his group continuing the conversation.

--I just love his views on race. It’s like Kerouac really understood the plight of his fellow man.--

Wait, wait… what fresh hell? Rafa looked up to see Chad, one of the LAX bros lying flat on his back and staring up at the sky, on his face, he wore a grin that made him look stoned.

“You’re joking right?” Rafa asked. Were they reading the same book? They couldn’t be.

“No. He just longs for a simpler time before the McCarthian politics of the fifties fucked everything up.”

As he waited for his phone to display what Chad had just said, Rafa groaned, “You know how at
the beginning of this project when the five of us got put in the same group, and I said that if my interpreter wasn’t around and you didn’t face me when speaking, I would likely not understand what you said? Yeah. Remember that? Well, you’re doing it again.” He didn’t mention that his phone was picking up almost all of the conversation. That piece of information he’d keep to himself. Could be useful later.

Chad R—not the same Chad as the one gazing up at the clouds. That was Chad S, in which the S stood for slimeball. The R stood for ratatapped–took a drink from his organic coconut water. “I totally know what you mean. I would love to just take a year off of school and travel the world. I would like stay in a different country in Europe every week. Maybe if I have time, go somewhere exotic to like Japan or something; find myself a nice submissive girl.”

Okay, see that there? That privileged way of thinking, see the world, but by world, Chad R meant Europe and maybe, possibly Japan (that wasn’t even saying anything about his fetishization of Japanese women…exotic, really? Fucking gag me), as though there weren’t other countries in the world…

--Bro, that is so on point. It’s like you’re inside my head.

Those words “looked” like they had come from Chad P (p for ‘pretentious doucheface’), but then again, since none of these assholes would actually look at him, he couldn’t be sure. “Yeah, cause wanting to emulate this mentality, and I quote, ‘wishing I were a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night… I wished I were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned.’ is so progressive. Oh dear. I’m so sorry you are a dreary, disillusioned, white man. Poor little you, with your privilege, and voice of power. I’m so sorry life isn’t exciting enough for you that you have to… No, you know what…don’t. You don’t actually want to be anything other than white, you just want to have token friends of color so you can look progressive. Newsflash, what Kerouac wrote there is fucking ridiculous. Okay? Because he didn’t understand the plights of us at all.”

Chad S sat up and rolled his eyes, finally looking at Rafa. “Oh my God, why is everything about race with you guys? You’re like that one hockey player that graduated…you know, the naked one? He made everything about feminism as if he had any idea what he was talking about.”

“’You Guys?’ Just go ahead and say it.” Rafa couldn’t stand working with this group. The Chads* were a bunch of pretentious assholes. Strictly speaking, ‘Chad’ wasn’t one of their real names. Rafa had forgotten what they were actually called about five seconds after they told him. He’d picked ‘Chad’ because it seemed fitting, and so what if he happened to turn it into an acronym for C ockfaced H omophobic A ss H at D ouchknuzzle? That was for him to know and not any of them.

The two times he’d endured working on this group project at the lacrosse frat, he met the rest of the team…in his head, they were all named Chad too. Except one guy, Ricky. Yeah, Ricky was a pretty decent guy, did volunteer work once a week for the local food shelter. He didn’t fit in with the whole LAX team. In fact, Ricky didn’t seem to actually like any of his teammates much, only enduring them because his lacrosse scholarship meant he needed to play on a team with them. Rafa could easily see himself being friends with him.

Oh, and apparently, as Adam had explained, there was a LAX bro named Thad whom he hated, and Rafa was quoting him here, “hated him with the passion of a million suns and would set all the plagues of Egypt upon him.” So… calling the rest of them Chad was not that far off.

He went back to his reading. Despite his many protests about how he did not want to put his name on anything that declared On the Road the penultimate depiction of the male experience, he was overruled. As such, he’d volunteered to put the presentation together in a slideshow so long as none of the rest of the group made him speak. Seemed fitting. he’d already drafted his response to the professor declaring that the opinions of his group were not indicative of his own.

While he read, he would occasionally look over at his phone to see if he was missing anything. For the most part, it was all the same vapid conversation the four Chad’s had been having for the past hour and a half. That is, until he saw, -- Chyeah. Hah. There’s your crew, Whisk-- flash across the screen. He glanced up and nodded, offering a small wave in the direction of his team, but they were too far away to see him. He assumed that was it and jotted down down key thoughts about the passage he’d just read before he forgot.

A minute or two later, after he’d gone back to ignoring them, he made the mistake of glancing at his phone.

-- The fucking hockey team. No offense, but every single time I look over from the lax house, like, those guys are listening to sh!t music and eating a bajillion cakes and prancing around like --I used to hang with hockey guys back in high school! But here, broh? Fuckin’ Samwell… “

And that was it; he’d had enough dealing with these dickholes for the day. “Pies,” he corrected. “Yeah they’re pretty weird... Being friends and supportive and all. Celebrating their diversity. So weird.” He’d lain on the sarcasm so thick it would probably take a chainsaw to cut through it.

He stood and packed his things. “Well, see you babacas cuzões in class.” As he walked away, he
was fairly certain he read some not at all nice things upon the lips of Chad U (u being ‘Ugly stick’.
He wasn’t kidding either; dude looked like he took a shovel to the face, and more than once.
Honestly, Chad U was a disgrace to ginger men around the world). Rather than confront him, he
just muttered in Portuguese under his breath.

Fuck the LAX bros indeed, and no, that was not a euphemism. He wouldn’t let any of those
clowns near his dick if his life depended on it.

Chapter End Notes

Portuguese translations-
Mais devagar.- slow down
babacas cuzões- asshole douchebags (not a literal translation though)

Spanish:
Más despacio-slow down
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sc1: “Joker and the Thief”- Wolfmother
Sc2-4: “Paralyzer”- Finger Eleven
Sc 5-6: “Change (In the House of Flies)”- Deftones

“Sick goal, Derek!” Rafa clapped him on the shoulder on their way to the bench. Derek’s blistering slapshot from the point with fifteen seconds left in regulation tied it up, and the team was itching to get back on the ice and send University of Maine packing.

He watched his interpreter, Andy’s fingers translate the game plan that Hall and Murray were laying down on the whiteboard. They would start with the line of Eric, Ollie, and Pacer (and didn’t that name take a fucking long time to commit to memory. Who names their kid Pa- oh never mind) with Justin and Adam on the blueline. Rafa wasn’t surprised at all by this. Keeping your experienced guys out on the ice for the first shift was a solid strategy.

He scooted down the bench, sitting down next to Tony.

“Hey, Whiskey,” Tony started, grabbing a bottle of water, taking a swig and then passing it Rafa, “I’m so nervous. Are you nervous? Like our first college overtime game. That’s... that’s a lot of pressure.”

Rafa looked over his shoulder at Andy waiting for him to translate Tony’s words. “A little I guess. Mostly, excited”

“God, I sure hope I don’t cost the team the game.”

Andy's hands relayed the words.

He gave Tony a playful punch in the shoulder. “No, man. You’re gonna be awesome. Just watch.”

When it came time for the referee dropped the puck and overtime began, Rafa took a deep breath of the chilly rink air, letting it settle in his chest. In front of him, he watched his team’s first line zip about the ice. Clean passes connected on the tape of their sticks; the opposing team landing hard checks whenever they could, but Samwell kept the puck in the offensive zone.

Being on third line gave him time to rest. Tony, himself, and Corey (turns out Rafa had been right that day in practice. Take that, fucked up left temporal lobe. The two of them worked out their differences and now got along...okay) waited for their chance to net a goal and earn their team the win. Adam skated off the ice, and Will hopped the boards for his second shift of the overtime period. Moments later Justin came in for a line change, Derek joining his linemate on the ice.

Then, it was their turn, and Rafa was practically vibrating out of his skin with excitement. See, he’d told a small fib to ease Tony’s nerves. The truth was, no matter the importance of the game, Rafa rarely felt all that nervous on the ice. Sure, he experienced a bit of anxiety about how he’d fare with whatever accommodations the other teams were able to offer, but as for his playing?

Piece of cake.

Despite the chaos of ten bodies near two hundred pounds each, slamming into each other in pursuit of a frozen piece of rubber, and the swift passes from a frenzy of sticks, Rafa felt a sense of calm whenever he was on the ice. There was something quite serene about flying around the sheet of white with brisk air hitting the exposed bits of his skin.

Two strides down the ice, the tell-tale vibration of the puck hitting the blade of his stick set his nerves alight with the thrill of the game. He dropped the puck through his legs and left it for Will coming up behind him. Will absorbed a check from a smaller forward and sent the puck across the ice to Tony, who caught it just in time to avoid a hard hit. Light on his feet for his 6’3” frame, Tony crossed the blue line into the offensive zone. Using a deft snap of his wrists, he shot the puck at the goal, only to have it strike the goaltender’s pads and bounce off.

An opposing defenseman gained possession of the rebound and tried to clear the zone. His attempt, however, was poorly executed, and it zipped through the air towards Rafa. With an open glove, he caught it and dropped it to the ice just in front of him. He dangled the shit out of a few players, evading their checks with skill that surprised him. Their giant defensemen held his ground in front of the crease, no doubt to help keep Samwell from crashing the crease.

That’s okay. You go right ahead and stand there like the awkward brick you are , Rafa thought, because he had absolutely no intention of pressing his luck against a guy half a foot taller and at least twenty pounds heavier than himself. Futile. Instead, he flew behind the net, puck still on the tape, and stuffed the puck through the gap between the goalie’s leg and the post.

The red light flashed in his face as the rest of his team cheered with him, those on the bench leaving to come join the celly. Rafa soon found himself surrounded by exuberant teammates, most
Will scratched his nose. Someone at this Epikegster was not only wearing the most obnoxious perfume or cologne, but way too much of it, and it was messing with his allergies. He’d sneezed forty-two times since he’d arrived; he’d kept count. Ugh

“You look like you could use this.” Nursey pressed a glass of tub juice into his hand, then raised his own. “Cheers to the win, my goal, and your two assists.”

Dex tapped his Solo cup against Nursey’s. “Where’s Whiskey? I feel we need to get him in on this liquid celly.”

Nursey looked over at him with a raised eyebrow. “I’m surprised you let him out of your sight.”

He paused, mid-drink and stared at him over the lip of his cup. “What are you implying, Nurse?”

Shrugging like the nonchalant hipster he was, Nursey grinned. “Oh nothing. Just that you seemed to have tuned your radar to know where our quiet teammate is at all times. Don’t even think you try half the time.”

“Well-huh,” he mused, rubbing his chin as he pondered Nursey’s words. “Guess you’re right. I can’t even give you a valid explanation other than I like interpreting for him.”

“I can.”

“Oh?”

Nursey looked out at the sea of people crowded in the Haus living room, nodded, and then pointed across the room. “Found your boy.”

Indignant, Will glared at his roommate. “He’s not my boy.”

“Yeah, but you want him to be.”

Oh God how he wanted him to be, and Nursey knew that. Hell Nursey was the only one at Samwell he’d even come out to at this point. Before college, only his dad knew, and honestly, having at least one person in his corner prior to leaving the nest was probably the only reason he told Nursey in the first place. He felt his cheeks...and the back of his neck flame. “So what if I do? That a problem?”

Beside him, he heard Nursey break out in raucous laughter. “With me? You’re asking me that? Did you hit your head, Poindexter?” he asked, reaching over to ruffle Dex’s hair.

“No,” he said, rubbing his nose once more. That’s it; he was telling Holster to ban those wearing obnoxious body sprays from future Haus parties. “Yeah, I do. Happy? But I think he’s on the straight and narrow.”

The sound of Nursey’s cackling grated on his nerves. “Straight? Hardly. Look, I may not have the world’s most finely tuned...Queerdar, but I would bet money on that boy being anything other than straight.”

“Mmm.” Dex rubbed his chin. His roommate was not a gambling sort of guy, so for him to joke about it...

“I mean you heard him mention how he loves flowers, and would love if you bought him some, right?”

“Yeah, but I think that was purely a chirp.”

“Keep telling yourself that, Dex.”

Dex rolled his eyes at him. “So, where are your loves tonight?”

Nursey leaned up against the wall, taking a long drink of his tub juice. “Amelia has a roadie, match tomorrow morning. Gonna be cold out on the pitch. Andre...I’m not actually sure. He was supposed to be here after their game. Last I checked it was the third quarter.”

Dex laughed. “Bro, he’s 6’10” not exactly hard to spot.”

“Tell me about it,” Nursey said with a blissful sigh and lowestuck grin plastered on his face, “and I love all 82 inches of him.” He took a sip from his cup. “Anyway, Yuka has a gig, and you know how much Luis hates parties.”

“Right. Sorry I forgot. ‘m I gonna be sexiled then?”
Nursey thought a while, bobbing his head to the thumping music that boomed around them.
“Naw, I don’t think I’m in the mood for anything other than a night of cuddling. You?”

Dex scoffed, “Me what? Sexile you? That would be a truly successful night indeed. Did you forget how I managed only two damn hook-ups last year, and one of those was only making out?”

Nursey rested his head upon Dex’s shoulders. “If you were that lonely, Will, you could have joined the Polyfi Posse. There’s always room for one more.”

“That is the worst name, Nurse. The worst. I think my two-time foray into you guys’ cuddle pile was enough for me. Just too many people touching me at once.” When Nursey began to nuzzle his neck, Dex pushed him off. “Stop it; you’re being ridiculous. You know that right?”

“Mmm. Love it when you get all snarky. It suits you.”

With that, Dex burst out laughing. “Ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous.”

Nursey straightened, pointing once more across the room. “Yeah. I know. But anytime you need a one-on-one snugglefest, I’m sure my partners wouldn’t have a problem with it so long as I don’t keep it a secret. Full disclosure is key to a successful polyfi relationship. Anyway, looks like our quiet Taddy has moves. You should let him put them and those hips to work on you.”

He almost choked on his tub juice at the sight of Whiskey dancing across the room in between two women and...Bitty? Though he wasn’t quite on beat, a little behind the pulse of the music, Whiskey’s face was bright, dimples on full display. It would be so easy to just go over there and insinuate himself in between Whiskey everyone else.

Easy for someone like Nursey, naturally charming, good with words, and looked like a bronzed god. Dex, well, it was harder for him. He was abrasive, too pale, and well guys did not seem to like his ridiculous ears all that much (something he’d been told by more than one potential romantic partner).

“Hello? Poindexter, anyone home?”

Dex shook himself out of his thoughts. “Um, sorry what?”

“Man, you’ve got it bad.”

“Tell me about it,” he grumbled into his cup. “You think him and Bitty have a thing going?”

Nursey shook his head. “No, I’m pretty sure I overheard Bitty complaining about no one wanting to dance, and Whisk said he’d dance with him. By the look on his face, I’m pretty sure Bitty was expecting him to dance about as well as Shitty sings. Gotta say, pleasant surprise. Now, go work that ginger magic of yours.”

“For the last time. There is no such thing as ‘Ginger Magic’.”

“Uh huh tell that to the Weasley’s.”

Truth be told, pleasant didn’t even begin to cover the almost sinful way Whiskey moved against his dance partners, the ladies. He seemed to be keeping a polite and respectful distance away from Bitty. Biggest ‘no homo’ indicator Dex knew of. ‘Sure I’ll dance with you, bro, but don’t expect me to hold your hand or anything.’

He took it back. Nursey could bet his money on Whiskey’s ‘non-straightness’ all he wanted; Dex was pretty sure he was wrong. See, unlike his roommate, his gaydar was pretty on point. He’d only been wrong twice in his life.

***

Out of breath, Rafa excused himself from Bitty, who both thanked him for the dance and for respecting his personal space bubble, and made his way to the kitchen for a drink. Though he was not much of a drinker, he wasn’t a complete teetotaler, and he’d been craving a glass of tub juice ever since he’d caught a whiff of it from Tony’s glass earlier.

A hand on his shoulder, however, stopped him, pulling him off-balance. He stumbled backwards and into a wall of muscle. Without turning around, Rafa was fairly certain that chest belonged to Adam. He’d recognize the scent of his cologne anywhere. “What can I do for you, Adam?”

He’d been correct, and Adam stepped out from behind him, facing him directly as he spoke, “How’d you know it was me?”

“You’re penchant for Burberry Sport.”

Eyebrows raised in surprise, Adam nodded. “That...is impressive. White noise on ponzu.”

What? “I’m sorry, could you try that again? You spoke too fast, and it’s kinda bad lighting in here; I’m pretty sure I read you wrong.”

Adam placed a solemn hand over his heart. “Apologies. I said you have quite the nose on you. You know, good sense of smell.”

“Oh, yeah. Thanks.” Rafa looked up as Tony came running into the kitchen looking like a
frazzled mess.

“Whiskey, I need your help!”

Then, Tony began spewing out a bunch of words that Rafa couldn’t read, but he let him go on uninterrupted, because honestly? It looked like poor Tony might pass out if he didn’t get everything off his chest. When there was a lull in his words, Rafa held up a hand to stop him.

“Feel better?”

“Yes.”

“Now, once more, but slower. And in English. Cause I’m pretty sure I read a desesperadamente enamorado in there and my Spanish is...meh so so.”

Tony put both hands on Rafa’s shoulders, giving him a little shake. “She’s here!”

“Who is?” Adam asked, and until the guy came to stand right beside Tony, Rafa had forgotten he was there.

“My Amazonian queen!” Tony smiled. “And I am too scared to ask her to dance.”

“I see. And who might that be?”

“Only Reda Vasiliauskaitė, the most beautiful woman in the world!”

Adam rubbed his chin. “I see. So what you’re saying is that you, Tango, our dear, sweet, overly curious tadpole, has a crush on the 6’5”, three time All-American, stroke in Samwell’s number 1 eights boat?”

“Duh! I just said all of that! She’s a goddess, future Aerospace Engineer, and I’m just...”

Whiskey shook his head at the situation. “Tony, I think if you tell her any of that, she’ll probably dance with you. Oh, hey, Will,” he said as Will came into the kitchen to refill his cup.

Will knocked his shoulder against Rafa’s. What’s up?

Tony is having a freakout about talking to a girl.

I see. Is it the hot rower he’s been crushing on?

Yeah, sounds like it.

Nice.

Holster wrapped an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Tango, my man! Tony, the Toaster!”

That cannot be what he actually said. See, Rafa, this is why you don’t drink at parties. Your lip-reading skills go out the fucking window. Thoroughly confused, Rafa turned to Will. Did he just call Tony a toaster?


I dunno. It looked like toaster. Are you sure you heard him right?

Yes.

“Hey, now. Share with the class,” Adam chastised them.

“Dude, not cool!”

Whiskey glared at him, jabbing a finger into Adam’s sternum. “No, you don’t get to do that. I know you’ve been drinking; I can smell it. So, I’m gonna let that pass and chalk it up to the tub juice. But don’t ever chirp me again for needing to resort to signing. I can’t use my speech to text app at parties. It’s too loud in here! Do it again, and I’ll clock you in the fucking jaw. Got it?”

Adam nodded.

“And anyway, I thought you called Tony a toaster.”

Looking contrite, Adam drew an ‘X’ across his heart. “Slicha. That means apologies, by the way. Oh hey, Tango, would mind if I called you our Brave Little Toaster?”

“Please don’t.” Had Rafa mentioned how much he failed at learning new names? He did? Well, adding yet another nickname to his teammates was just that much more of a pain in the ass.

“Yeah, Imma do it. Tango, my brave little toaster. Come, let me help you talk to your Regatta Queen.”

When the pair of them had exited the kitchen, leaving on Will and himself, Rafa pinched the bridge of his nose. “You know sometimes, he really irritates me.”

“Tell me about it.” He filled both of their glasses with tub juice, and they walked back into the fray. For several minutes, they watched the rest of the party, sharing no words between them. They simply enjoyed each other’s company. Eventually, he turned to Rafa, “So, Whiskey, I was wondering if you might want to da-”

Will’s words were cut short when a woman bumped into them, causing Rafa to drop his drink.
“Damn it,” he said, looking down at the red liquid seeping into the white suede of his oxfords. Rest in peace my glorious kicks.

Someone tapped him on the shoulder drawing him out of his moment of mourning for his ruined shoes. He looked up to see Will pointing to the woman.

“Oh my god. I am so sorry.” She patted him on the chest. “Let me…” and then she lost him.

Ugh, that’s it. He was done with the tub juice tonight. What did she say?

Will’s stony expression told him she either was a bit rude, or Will found her annoying. Though which, Rafa couldn’t be sure.

Three sentences apologizing about your ruined shoes. Two more about your amazing fashion sense. The rest was about how hot she thinks you are, which included a lot of “Oh my, God”s, “Soooo cute”s, and wondering if you’d look as good out of your clothes as you do in them. And she may have asked who does your eyebrows.

I get them threaded.

What does that mean? Dex asked, repeating the sign for eyebrow and thread.

T-H-R-E-A-D-I-N-G. Ask Derek. He’s the one that recommended Jamila at Threadz. Did a great job on my chest and underarms.

Your chest and underarms? Why?

Rafa shrugged, unable to fathom why Will had just asked him that, Because I want to. Obviously.

Um, what?

Well, thanks to the scars on my chest, my chest hair looks terrible. And the hair under my arms tickles; it’s itchy, and I hate it.

Rafa turned to the woman. “Thank you,” he told her, for lack of anything else to say.

“Oh my God! You’re deaf?”

He knew he read that perfectly clear. She sound disgusted by that?

Nope. Definitely not. Okay, that look Will just gave him? That was an annoyed look. And now she said something about she would never have been able to tell based on the way you danced. Dunno, that seems a bit rude.

Well, you asked me how I was able to enjoy music being Deaf.

Sheepish, Will nodded. Well, no. I thought you played an instrument. I did not ask how you could enjoy music. Anyway, she asked if you wanted to dance. And that expression right there, was even more annoyed. Rafa couldn’t really understand what Will’s problem was with her. She seemed nice, was pretty cute, with her long blonde hair, full lips, decent body. Not that he had a particular type of body he found attractive. On that front, he was pretty open, and by open he meant he absolutely did not care what someone identified as. It all hinged on… damn those were some beautiful hands. Gorgeous hands and a perfect mouth? Sold. Totally sold.

“Oh, um, sure. See ya later, Will,” he said as she pulled him towards the dance floor.

***

“See when I said go work your ginger magic, that is not what I meant,” Nursey said, clapping Dex on the back hard enough to knock him off balance.

Dex rubbed his shoulder and winced. “Was it necessary to hit me that hard?”

Contrite, Nursey gave him what Dex had come to call ‘The Puppy-Eyed Face of Doom’ (trademark pending) because every time, every god damned time, he used it, Dex would find himself going along with whatever plan came his way. “Sorry, bro. But like I saw you. You and him, you were talking, then standing there closer than could possibly be considered platonic, and you said nothing!”

Dex gritted his teeth together, taking a moment to remember to breathe before responding. “That’s not true. I had been asking him to dance with me, but she ran into him before I could finish. Then it was like I didn’t exist because of a pretty face and a pair of breasts. Clearly, he was looking for a good time.”

“You could have been that good time!” Nursey paused for a moment. “Actually no, you want more than that.”

“Doesn’t matter. Like I told you, straight as an arrow,” he tried not to sound too jealous when he pointed across the room, but it was hard when he was watching a guy he was crushing so damn hard on (pun intended and also… no, Jesus, Poindexter, pull yourself together) dance dirtier than a Magic Mike striptease without the stripp- oh for fuck’s sake, why did she have to kiss him?
Better yet, why did he have to kiss back?

Dex turned around and pressed his forehead to the wall. “Never fall for a straight guy!” he groaned, each word punctuated by banging his head on the wall. “Stupid, Will, so stupid. Stupid.”

Before he could give himself brain damage to erase the image of that woman, whose name he didn’t even get, grabbing hold of Whiskey’s ass from his mind, Nursey pulled him away from the wall. “Don’t do that to yourself, Dex. You have too fine a mind to pulverize. Come on. We’re going to go save Tango from Holster’s attempts at matchmaking. Kid looks like he’s gonna puke.”

Nursey guided him through the mass of sweaty bodies of students at various levels of drunkenness until they found Holster, arm around Tango’s shoulders trying to sell Tango’s good qualities to a woman even taller than he was. “I don’t think you understand how insightful our boy Tango here is, Reda.”

The woman, Reda, whom Dex recognized from one of Samwell’s athlete luncheons, crossed her arms, and arched a perfectly sculpted eyebrow at Holster. “You keep talking, Birkholtz, and you don’t let the poor guy get a word in. Anyone ever tell you that you talk over people too much?” Reda asked, her Lithuanian accent far thicker than Dex remembered from the one occasion they’d spoken. When she noticed Nursey and Dex coming to stand in the group, she rolled her eyes. “Oh God. Not more of you.”

Dex shook his head. “I’m not gonna say anything. Tony here is a big boy, if he wants to ask you out, he can do it himself.” Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Tango blush like a tomato.

“L...um...yeah...I...” Tango scrubbed his hands down his face. Dex caught a few words of his little pep-talk, words like ‘Got this’ and ‘Grow a pair’. Tango took a deep breath and straightened, extending his hand, “Nice to meet you, Reda Vasiliauskaitė. I’m Tony Johnson, but my team calls me Tango.”

She smirked, but shook his hand nonetheless. “You even pronounced it correctly. I’m impressed.”

“I may have listened to audio samples,” he said, Dex noticing him chewing on his bottom lip out of nervousness.

“Did you?”

Tango rubbed the back of his neck, all prior confidence seemingly gone. “L.uh...you’re the most...gah!” He turned to leave, muttering ‘I can’t do this,’ under his breath, but Nursey stopped him.

“Tango, breathe.” When Tango obliged, Nursey continued. “You’ve gushed about your crush on several occasions. If you are too nervous to tell her how pretty you think she is, compliment her skill at rowing, or how awesome you think it is that she is going to work with space in the future. That will go a lot farther than giving platitudes about her looks.”

“Ok.” He turned around. “I saw that you are majoring in Aerospace Engineering. Do you want to work with with NASA? Like be an astronaut, because that would be so cool. I’ve never met an astronaut.”

Just like Nursey had said, her standoffish demeanor softened. “I don’t want to be an astronaut, but I would love to work for the ESA, that’s Europe’s version of NASA to help design future space exploration vehicles. That’s the dream anyway.”

“That’s amazing. God, you must be like a genius, because the math involved is sooo difficult! That’s...”

“What?” she asked, flipping her long blonde braid off her shoulder.

“Hot, unbelievably hot. Like you have no idea how attractive I find women with giant brains. I could probably stand here and ask questions about space for hours, and rowing...though I know almost nothing about rowing.”

Flustered, she licked her lips, smiling despite her sudden bashfulness. “Would you...would you like dance, Tony?”

Jaw hanging open and unable to respond, he nodded and let her tug him into an empty space. Holster, whom Dex had forgotten was even standing there gave a salute to Tango’s back.

“Godspeed, brave taddy.” Then, Holster, emboldened by Tango’s good fortune, squared his shoulders. “So long, frogs. I’m on a mission. Got two crushes of my own. So if you will excuse me, I’m gonna go see about a boy...and his girlfriend. Wish me luck.”

“Um...good luck?” Dex had had just about enough of the party at this point.

“Get it, Holster!” Nursey shouted across the room, just as Holster had insinuated himself into the dancing pair of Ransom and March.

Dex braced himself on behalf of the guy as he expected March to smack him across the face. However, the pair separated, stepping back to let Holster step in the middle. You’ve got to be kidding me. That can’t possibly work. Yet, as he watched his captains begin to makeout in the middle of the party, with March joining in to kiss at the back of Holster’s neck, he found that he wanted to bang his head against a wall again.

He groaned in frustration. “Why is everyone managing to hook up but me?”
“Come on, I’m gonna take you home. I can text Andre to pick up ice cream on his way over, and the three of us are gonna watch Back to the Future, because it’s filled with that ‘Dad Rock’ music you love so much.”

Dex pinched the bridge of his nose. “Chuck Berry is not ‘Dad Rock’, Nurse. I like guitars, why does that make everything I listen to ‘Dad Rock’?”

Nursey, however, didn’t seem to want to answer him, because he simply herded Dex out of the Haus and towards their residence hall without another word.

***

Rafa panted and rolled over to catch his breath, before pulling off his condom and tossing it in the trashcan beside his partner’s bed. He felt a bit bad for not remembering her name--Carolyn he thought--but wasn’t sure. The sex had been good, not great, but that’s what he got for hook-ups. He rarely found casual sex mind-blowing by any stretch of the word. It was too hard to connect with people he’d just met, and for it to cross the realm into amazing, he needed that connection. The only problem? He rarely felt that connection. Rarely feeling the need to seek out actual relationships in order to obtain said connection put a hamper on things. In fact, he’d only dated one person so far in his short life, so once that relationship ended, it was a string of hook-ups. Why?

Because his left hand was often not satisfying enough, and sometimes he just needed to get laid. This had been one of those times.

The bed shifted as she got up and grabbed her phone and piece of red paper off a bulletin board. He barely had time to get his speech to text app open and running before she started talking.

So, thanks to you, I have just completed my Hookup Bingo card.

“Your what?”

She turned the paper around, and sure enough there were four spaces left to complete a full card. A wave of disgust washed over him. Not at the fact her card was almost full--Whatever, not his business who people slept with or how many. Be safe and all that. No, he was sick to his stomach when he saw the squares remaining: Disabled, Hispanic, High-maintenance, and. - See? You gave me a full card. That has taken me almost three years. Honestly, I just lucked out with the ‘Uncircumcised’ box. Who knew right? And, didn’t look as weird as I expected.

“Yeah, that probably sounded like a good thing in your head, but backhanded compliments about my dick aren’t really compliments.”

Ignoring him, she held up her phone. - Smile. I need pictures of my partners for proof .

He’d just managed to grab the sheet and throw it over himself before she snapped the picture. Hell, she didn’t even give him time to say that no, he did not wish to serve as photographic proof. That initial disgust that started when he saw the game card, had turned to downright nausea when the reality of the situation sunk in. “And there’s a group who is actually running this?”

-Obviously. I get a t-shirt. Anyway. This was fun, if you could get dressed and get out before my roommate gets home-

“Gee thanks, Carolyn” he put every ounce of sass he could into those three words. -Camberlyn.

“Wait, really?” What the fuck kind of suburban soccer mom name was Camberlyn?

- You didn’t think I was actually attracted to you as a person, did you?

“Yeah. I did. That’s usually what people mean when they say as much. ”

She began giggling, and he wanted to throw up. - No. Look, I needed to complete a square, and I knew you were deaf so… I lied. Fake it to make it. Come on; it was a hook-up, not ever after. Oh my God! Was that your first time? Wow, I have a knack for finding virgins.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “About four years too late for that, Camberlyn. You weren’t even my first woman.” He was fairly certain his tone conveyed a high level of sass, but difficult to say. “I’m Deaf not stupid. You aren’t my first one-night rodeo; I was fully aware this was a hook-up.”

Well, you’re pretty upset for someone who seemed into it.

“I was into it, when I thought I was just sex, not some token in a sick game. Most people don’t like being used. Had you told me from the get-go about the bingo card, I might be a little less pissed the fuck off right now.”

Oh don’t looked like a kicked puppy. Like I could really be interested in someone disabled. As if anyone could. I gotta say, you were damn good, especially for a disabled guy. I mean you’re lucky you’re hot and have a big dick. It’s called pity sex. Hey, you think I could pass your name onto my friends playing?

He clenched his jaw, internally fuming, as he read the last two sentences. “No offence, you know
since honesty seems to be a theme we have going here, but your blowjob skills could use a lot of work.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “You didn’t need to be an asshole.”

“Didn’t stop you from being one first.” He watched as her jaw hit the floor. “Oh were you expecting me to bow down and thank you from the bottom of my Deaf, Latino heart for bestowing attention on me in the form of sex and thinly veiled ableism? You said it yourself: I’m hot with a big dick. I don’t need pity sex. I’ve never needed pity sex.”

Within a minute, he was dressed and out of her apartment. Shower, he needed a shower, just to get the smell of her perfume off him, get the feel of her lips- her hands off of him. He wasn’t sure what made him feel worse, the fact he’d been used for a sex game or her words.

Her words. Definitely her words.

His walk across campus towards his residence hall only served to make him feel more sick to his stomach. Two blocks away, he patted his pocket and kicked a trashcan when he realized he’d left his keys in his dorm room. He knew precisely where too. Right there on his fucking dresser.

God damn it.

He shouted in frustration before pulling his phone and the small pill box from his inside jacket pocket. Thank God he’d remembered that. Stopping at a drinking fountain on the quad, he popped his Minipress dose into his mouth and washed it down.

To: Will
12:05 am

You home? Awake? Alone?

From: Will
12:06 am

Yeah. I mean, Nursey's here with Andre, but it's fine. What's up?

To: Will
12:07 am

I forgot my keys in my room, and there won't be anyone at the front desk to help me until tomorrow. I just want to sleep and forget tonight.

From: Will
12:07 am

Come on over. You can crash here.

To: Will
12:07 am

Thanks. Be there in a few.

With a sigh, he ambled on over to Will and Derek's dorm.

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“So, we’re getting some company,” Dex said.

“Oh yeah?” Nursey lifted his head off Andre’s chest and looked across the room at him. “Who?”

“Whiskey locked himself out of his place.”

Nursey smirked at him. “Uh huh, sure he did.”
He didn’t deign to justify his words with a response, choosing to tug on a shirt and go wait for Whiskey. As he stood there in the empty lobby, his nerves began to eat away at him again. Why did Whiskey want to forget tonight? Had something happened? Bad sex? The possibilities were endless, and upon first glimpse of him as he walked through the first door, Dex found himself wanting to do whatever it took to get that look off Whiskey’s face...and keep it off, make sure it never showed up again.

_Hey, thanks for letting me stay at your place. I just… it doesn’t matter._

When Dex began to walk towards the elevator, Whiskey stopped, holding back and fiddled with the hem of his jacket. _We can take the stairs if you want. It’s only three floors. I know you don’t like elevators. Not sure why, but you don’t._

_Yeah. I get claustrophobic._

Something on Whiskey’s face told him not to ask for further explanation. _No worries._ He clapped him on the shoulder.

Why wasn’t he speaking at all?

_Ugh. I feel disgusting. Hey, you mind if I borrow a pair of sweatpants and shirt…and like shower supplies?_  

_Sure_. He dug through his drawers for a pair of pants. “Hey, Nursey, your shirts are probably bigger in the shoulders. Don’t think mine will fit him.” He quickly signed to Whiskey what he’d just said so he didn’t feel lost.

“Yeah. Oh, Whiskey, this is my boyfriend, Andre. Well, one of them.” He handed him a t-shirt

Whiskey looked back over at Dex, waiting for him to sign. This was odd, Dex thought. Whiskey usually tried to lipread first, before asking for interpretation. First he wasn't speaking, and now no lipreading. Clearly, it had been a bad night. After he handed Whiskey his shower caddy and directed him to the bathrooms, he turned to Nursey. “So that was weird right? I wasn’t just imagining it?”

“ Weird how? I’m not the one who usually hangs out with him, nor am I the one who wants in his pants. I mean I wouldn’t pass up the opportunity. Guy’s fucking beautiful.”

“He just seems off, and when he messaged me he said he wanted to sleep and forget the whole night. I think- Man, I don’t know. It’s just odd.”

“Can I ask a question without being rude?” Andre asked.

“Depends. Is it a rude question?”

“I don’t think so. Just, does he talk?”

“Yeah. Perfectly, which is part of why this situation feels so weird.”

Dex settled back in his bed, turning the situation over and over in his mind. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something had turned Whiskey’s happy mood he’d been in ever since scoring the game winner earlier. He’d been elated to be the first frog to score a goal, performed a stellar kegster and sported a huge grin most of the night.

_That Whiskey was nowhere to be seen._

“So…um. This shirt doesn’t fit, Derek. It’s too tight across the chest. You got anything bigger?” Whiskey asked when he returned, freshly showered, less than ten minutes later.

His words caught Dex’s attention, and he snapped his head towards the door where Whiskey stood, hair still wet and lying flat to one side. Nursey’s shirt was draped over a shoulder, and he clutched his towel and dirty clothes to his chest, but was otherwise shirtless. An overwhelming urge to taste and lick and kiss would have knocked Dex on his ass if he wasn’t already sitting down.

“Just go without one,” Andre suggested, his baritone timbre resonating in the room.

Dex settled back in his bed, turning the situation over and over in his mind. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but something had turned Whiskey’s happy mood he’d been in ever since scoring the game winner earlier. He’d been elated to be the first frog to score a goal, performed a stellar kegster and sported a huge grin most of the night.

_That Whiskey was nowhere to be seen._

As he’d done before his shower, Whiskey turned to Dex for help. This was just too strange, but at least he was talking now. Nevertheless, he helped out his buddy.

“Yeah, not a fan of being shirtless around other people. So…”

Nursey dug through his basket of clean, but unfolded laundry, and tossed another shirt at him. Whiskey held it up, rose an eyebrow at him over the fact he’d been thrown a crop top to wear to bed (of course Nursey would do such a thing. Of fucking course. Honestly, it was like his friend was trying to kill him), eventually shrugging and pulling it on over his head.

Dex would love to have said he was a gentleman and didn’t watch, but, he was only human, and he savored the eyeful of skin, however short-lived. The scar running down Whiskey’s sternum and others marking his right pectoral were nothing new. He’d seen a glimpse or two in the locker room before Whiskey hurried to dress after showering. He could tell the guy was self-conscious about them, and never asked for an explanation. And he could easily see how they could affect the growth pattern of chest hair.

However, he’d never seen the tattoo on his side, just under the arm. He winced internally at the thought of how painful being inked across the ribs must have been. His peak at it was far too short
to really make out what it was though.

“Thanks. Hey, Will, you got an extra pillow for me?” he asked grabbing the extra blanket draped
over the back of Nursey’s desk chair and spreading it out on the floor.

No, you are not going to sleep on the floor. Come on up here. I won’t bite, and if it will make
you feel better, I’ll throw a ‘N-O H-O-M-O’ in there.

“Why would that make me feel better? Actually, it would make feel pretty shitty. So don’t.”

“Okay… spill. What has you all messed up? You have me worried as hell here. Did something…
you hooked-up with that woman I assume… or no? Did she not take ‘no’.”

Whiskey leveled him with a glare, and then sighed, eyes closed. Dex could see him silently
counting to ten and back to one before he opened up, recounting the events of the last two hours
or so. By the time he finished speaking, Dex was ready to head to battle on his behalf.

“Aw man. That sucks. Ames got snagged in Hookup Bingo Freshman year;” Nursey said, making
sure to face Whiskey as he spoke.

“Ames?”

“Amelia. She’s one of our quintet.”

He squinted, trying to parse out what Nursey had meant. “I’m sorry. I have no idea what that
means.”

“Oh. Me and Andre here are two fifths of a polyamorous quintet. Amelia, Luis, and Yuka round
out the rest of the group. Poor Ames though, lost her virginity to a guy only using her to complete
a square. The whole thing is cruel. There’s a petition to ban the student group running it if you
want to sign it.”

Is he serious about the polyamorous thing?

Dex chuckled. Yep. They keep asking if I want to join up, but I have no interest in trying to
navigate those waters. Not sure what I’d do with girlfriends. Totally foreign concept for me.

“Gotcha,’ he said to Nursey. “Sounds complicated. Yeah, if you could give me the information.
I’ll sign. Cause I feel pretty damn awful right now.”

“Communication and honesty are key. Always room for one more if you’re interested.”

Whiskey shook his head as he climbed onto Dex’s bed with him. “No. Not really my thing, but
you keep doin’ you, Derek. Whatever makes you happy. I just-”

Nursey told him he was missing out and pressed play on their movie.

“Um…” Whiskey started, simply pointing to the screen.

“Oh right.” Nursey pulled up the subtitles menu.

You okay with us turning the light off? The TV has a lot of glare from this angle.

Whiskey nodded, and they settled into bed, both a little too cramped for the ‘platonic’ level
distance between them. Dex wondered if Whiskey’s reaction to his offer to ‘no homo’ their bed
sharing meant what he hoped it did.

Just as the scene with Biff and Lorraine were in the car, things escalating from innocent to
harrassment, he felt Whiskey flinch beside him. He felt, rather than heard his breathing quicken,
because the bed shook with each shudder. Worried about his friend, Dex reached over and
grabbed both his phone from the dresser.

Once he had the notepad app open, he began to swipe his finger across the screen.

Are you okay?

Then, he tapped him on the arm, earning another flinch, before Whiskey opened his eyes. Dex
pressed his phone into his hand.

Whiskey took several shaky breaths more and then responded.

No. I don’t… scenes like that upset me.

Scenes like what? Dex passed back the phone.

It’s… yeah. Please don’t ask me to elaborate. Please. But- Hey, your signing has improved a
lot.

I joined the campus ASL club. It’s been helpful.

Dex gave him a reassuring rub on the arm and set down the phone. Rather than continue watching
the movie, Whiskey, he noticed, rolled onto his stomach, face turned towards him, and fell asleep.
His soft breaths had evened out and now washed over the bare skin of Dex’s chest. It was good,
so good, and soon, he found he no longer had an interest in the film. Watching Whiskey sleep, his
face relaxed, soft even, with no trace of the rough night he’d had, was far more interesting.

It wasn’t long before his eyelids began to droop, and Dex scooted down the bed, pulling the
blanket over both of them. For once, he didn’t even mind the tight squeeze at fitting two people in
his twin sized bed.

In fact, he relished in it.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Track Listing
Scene 1: “For You”- Staind
Scene 3: “Papercut”- Linkin Park
Scene 4: “Heathens”- Twenty One Pilots

Scenes 2 and 3 you might recognize as originally appearing as a Tumblr fic/prompt fill of mine, and I decided to incorporate them into this chapter because they fit well with the subject.

Please see trigger/content warning in end of chapter note

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You gonna be around later if I have trouble with the homework?” Rafa asked Ricky while they walked down the street towards the Haus and incidentally, the LAX house.

Sure. I don’t know if I’ll be much help. I am having the worst problem differentiating between Homo Habilis, Homo Ergaster, and Homo Erectus. Like… they all sound the same, and look kinda the same. - Rafa read as his phone displayed the text of Ricky’s words.

He scratched his chin. “I think it has something to do with brain size. Fuck if I know. I’m only five pages into this week’s reading. Seriously… one hundred and fifty pages! Who does that?”

Professor Garrison apparently. And just a heads up that one article about field analysis is way scientific.

“Oh yeah? Pretty dry?”

Like the Sahara. Ricky clapped him on the shoulder and waved good-bye as they split ways.

“Later, man.”

Thrilled at having a long day of classes behind him and finally turning in his reaction essay for that ridiculous book project he’d endured with the Chad’s—honestly, he would love to see the professor’s face as she read all the ways he tore apart the project, citing his opinions being ignored, the racist undertones to half the shit his groupmates said, the overt ableism… God it would be priceless—Rafa grinned when he walked into the Haus and was greeted with the aroma of peaches and… basil. He wondered who’d let it spill to Bitty that this was his favorite pie: Will or Tony. “Hello?”

When no one made their presence known, he sat down at the kitchen table, in the middle of which, was pie. The note attached said to ‘Help, yourself. Make sure Whiskey gets a piece. -ERB’ He sat down, eating in solitude. That was okay. As an introvert, he didn’t mind being by himself.

Halfway through his slice, Chris walked into the kitchen, sitting down across from him. Since he didn’t try to get his attention, Rafa figured he wasn’t in the mood to talk and kept eating as he looked over a reading for his anthropology class. Yeah, after seeing the workload some of his fellow first years had for Biology 101, he was thrilled he’d taken the anthro route to fulfill his science requirement.

Then, the table began to vibrate. Wha- It wasn’t his phone; that was in his pocket. He glanced up to see Chris drumming his fingers against the wood. His lips were drawn together, twitching slightly. “Need help with something?” Rafa asked between bites.

Chris shrugged. “No. I- Someone pranked me. Chompers is missing.”

“Campers? If there are campers missing someone should call the cops. I don’t know what help I will be.”

Chris held up a finger and scurried over to the fridge to grab the note pad and pen. Then, he jotted down some letters before handing it across the table to Rafa.

“Chompers. Who is Chompers?”

“My stuffed shark. The big one from my bed.”

Oh yeah, right. He’d seen that from the Haus tour.

“How you like seen it around anywhere?”

Rafa shook his head. “Not that I can recall. Though I can’t imagine why anyone would prank you. You’re so nice. Like, when I have pranked people, I go for the assholes. They’re the ones who deserve it. But I will.” His words were cut off as Eric came into the kitchen.

Rafa followed him with his eyes when Eric didn’t acknowledge them. He took some veggies from the fridge and a massive package of steak, setting them on the counter. His whole posture sagged; there was none of the warmth and hospitality Rafa had come to expect from Eric in the short time
he’d known him.

“Are you okay?”

Eric turned around and looked at him. “I- well… no.”

“Need to talk about it?”

He waved Rafa off. “I’ll be fine. I’m a big boy; I’ll manage. How about you? Do you like your birthday pie?”

“But my birthday is next week. It’s delicious though. Thank you.”

“Well, next week is midterms. Hey, I planned fajitas for tonight. I know it’s not authentic Latino food. I’ll try harder next time.”

“Don’t worry about it, Eric. I like fajitas. Honestly, I’m just thankful for you making me dinner at all.”

Eric smiled at him, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Rafa could tell he was happy the pie had been well received, but something, whatever it was, was bothering him too much to bask in the compliment. Instead of press the issue further, Rafa went and washed his hands at the sink.

“Would you like some help with prepping the vegetables?”

“I’d like that. Thanks. If you could julienne these peppers and onions that would help a lot. I’m trying my hand at homemade tortillas.”

“Oh my God, Eric. I think I might genuinely love you right now. I could kiss you,” Rafa laughed. “Even if you make them with masa instead of mandioca… um cassava flour, they’re gonna be amazing.”

“Your enthusiasm is touching.”

While other people might have found cooking prepwork tedious, he rather enjoyed it. The repetition calmed his mind and relieved stress. Plus, seeing all those uniformly sliced vegetables was aesthetically pleasing to his artistic eye. In no time, a large plate of vegetables were ready for the skillet.

As he chopped though, he was aware of activity occurring behind him, but he was loath to worry about it. That is, until, he felt a shudder reverberate through the house, and he turned around.

Holster stood there in the kitchen, fuming, arms folded across his chest. “Okay, which one of you punks thought it was a good idea?”

Rafa furrowed his brows. “What? Honestly, I just came for pie. And share my joy at screwing over the Chad’s in my lit class.”

For a brief second, the ire disappeared from Holster’s face. It was replaced with a grin. “Nice. But I’m still pissed off. One, Ransom is in full coral reef mode right now over midterms next week and needs Bourque. So where the hell is it?”

“Björk? The swan dress lady?”

To Rafa’s surprise, Holster stopped and fingerspelled out the word. “What? Don’t look shocked. I’ve been practicing. Good captains must be able to communicate with their players. So… anyone seen Ransy’s plush dog? Or for that matter, the lion my nana made me?”

Conversation moved too quickly from then on for Rafa to follow, but he picked up a word here and there. From what he was able to surmise, everyone in the kitchen (which now included Nursey and Lardo) was missing a treasured item, mostly stuffed animals, or in Lardo’s case a quilt. Since it included everyone in the Haus, suspicion fell on him. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. I have literally been here for less than half an hour, and all but two minutes of that time, I have been in the company of someone else. Like I told Chris, I only prank people who deserve it. None of you do. So lay off. Okay? Tell Justin that I have a therapy plush back in my dorm, I will be happy to lend him. It’s got a heartbeat in it, always helps me.” He rolled his eyes as he walked out of the kitchen, grumbling under his breath about being thrown under the bus.

Not even two blocks from the Haus, he ran into Will—literally—who had been walking with his head down, hands in his pockets, kicking a stone along the sidewalk. Rafa extended a hand down to help him up, dusted leaves out of his hair. “Gonna run into a tree walking like that, Will.”

“Sorry.”

The downturned mouth, crease between his brow and slumped posture was out of the ordinary for Will. Rafa had long since grown used to seeing the skepticism and flared nostrils that was Will’s resting facial expression. So this… well this set off alarms. “Hey, are you okay?”

Will’s lips quivered and he shook his head. Someone broke into mine and Nursey’s dorm. They stole this stuffed penguin Nurse has. Yuka got it for him when she visited Japan last year. He loves that thing, though he’d never admit to it. Would detract from his ‘chill’. But they took my lighter and I’m broken up about it.

_Lighter? You don’t smoke._
Will rubbed his shoulders before continuing. *I know. It was my grandpa’s. He fought in WWII, and he etched this intricate design onto it. Had his unit and company on there. His name. They call it t-re-e-n-c-h art. Anyway thing doesn’t even work, but I keep it as a reminder that if he could survive Guadalcanal, I can pass my exams. It’s... why? I just don’t get it.*

*I think it’s the whole team so far. Everyone at the Haus is missing someth-

Without finishing his sentence, Rafa grabbed Will’s wrist and dragged him along after. “Come on.”

The trip across campus to the freshman residence hall was short and fraught with stress. By the time Rafa made it up the stairs to his room, he was about to vibrate out of his skin with anxiety. Sure enough, he had not been immune to the pranksters, if it was a prank. For all he knew, it was more than that.

His whole body tensed up at the sight of his room. Not ransacked as such, but in enough a state of disarray to have him shaking. A messy room could unravel him faster than almost anything else. Cleanliness was necessary, as he wasn’t tidy by nature, no tidy by nurture which was worse. He shuddered, taking a moment to breathe. “I have to— I have…”

Have to clean was what he tried to say.

His hands went to work righting his things, putting each thing back in perfect order the way it should be, the way it had to be or else…

He only had a moment or two to process before words he’d heard so many times before echoed in his head all at the same time in a cacophony of cruelty.

“If you don’t clean this mess I really give you something to cry about!”

“Now look what you made me do!”

“Useless bitch! Can’t even clean a house right!”

“What are you crying about you worthless little bastard? Don’t you run away from me!”

“Stop it,” he chided his brain. “Knock it off.” He took calming series of breaths, holding each for eight seconds. Was it the most useful for staving off panic? Nope, but it worked. He continued the search for missing items, feeling like he’d been hit by a brick when he noticed Paulo missing.

“Assholes…”

Will tapped him on the shoulder. *Sorry. Were you talking to me? I didn’t think I was doing anything.*

Not you. *Was talking to my brain.* Even though he hadn’t let himself fall into a full mess of intrusive thoughts, direct eye contact when Will wasn’t signing made him uncomfortable. Force of habit, he supposed. If he averted his eyes then- well, let’s just say that *Look at me when I’m talking to you!* wasn’t one of his favorite phrases.

Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed one of his posters had been ripped. “Anitta! What have they done to you?” He frowned at the rip right through her leg. The sticky note stuck next to her face with a speech bubble with ‘Woof,’ printed on it pissed him the hell off. He peeled the note and crumbled it. “They wouldn’t know a beautiful woman if one fell through the roof of their cab. The heathens.”

He just about had his emotions under control when a piece of paper shifted under his foot. He looked down where several scores of his sheet music had been ripped in half. And that was it.

He was fucking pissed.

“Puta merda!” When his foot collided with his trash bin, sending it flying across the room with a shout of frustration, he hadn’t even been thinking. Yet, when he watched Will duck out of the way, a heavy weight settled in his stomach. Rafa blinked a few times. “I… um-” He licked his lips. “Did that hit you? I promise I wasn’t aiming for you.”

Will shook his head.

Rafa rubbed his forehead, then pinched the bridge of his nose, his thumb and index finger trying to stop the few tears he could feel trying to force their way out of his eyes. Forgetting names, no hearing, losing time to flashbacks, the nightmares… all those he could handle. But the flashes of rage, white hot and sudden—fuck how he hated those.

They filled him with guilt, made him nauseated.

Everything else that he dealt with as a result of his injuries happened to him. Angry outbursts were what he did to someone else. The guilt stemmed not only from direct consequence of things he’d said or things he’d broken, but from a fear that one day he might turn out just like him. After all,
a third of the time, the cycle of abuse continued.

The thought sickened him; it terrified him

It was natural and common, his therapist said, for anger to manifest as a symptom of PTSD. It was seen even more frequently among children with the disorder. Adding that to the last effects of his brain injury, it was no surprise he got angry. Knowing that didn’t make him feel any better though.

He sighed, shoulders slumping, posture collapsing in defeat. “I’m sorry, Will. I… that was wrong. It’s not your fault, and I shouldn’t have kicked that. I meant it though when I said I wasn’t aiming for you. See, um…” He rubbed the back of his neck, the clamminess of his skin, already present because of his anxiety, had worsened after his anger had subsided. See that was the thing. Sometimes his bouts of rage lasted twenty minutes, sometimes only one. “This thing happens when I get mad sometimes. Stuff just goes fuzzy. Like tunnel vision, only whiting out instead of blacking out. I can’t help it. I hate it, but it’s not my fault. I mean- Gah!” He ran his hands through his hair. “I don’t want…” ‘To be like him’ remained unsaid. “But it was wrong, and I’m sorry.”

He held out his arms, gesturing to his disheveled room. “This mess isn’t helping my stress level any.”


No, it’s not, but thanks.

Will stooped down to scoop up the torn papers. Do you have a scanner? You can just scan and reprint them.

No.

I’m pretty sure Lardo has one. Let me help?

“Yeah okay.”

***

He’d seen this building dozens of time since coming to Samwell, but its appearance when Rafa passed it twice a week was a far cry from how it looked now. From the outside and during the day, it was pretty innocuous, just a converted old warehouse used as an event center just off campus. Now though? Dozens of people stood in line waiting for their turn to go inside.

Simulated smoke—or perhaps it was supposed to be fog—seeped out from the cracks in the windows and gaps in the brick. Through some windows, Rafa could see the orange glow of colored lights. Employees in all manner of gruesome costumes and makeup walked about, some inside, some outside the building. There were probably ominous noises and ambient music emanating from within—well, more than probable to be honest, because the ground beneath his feet vibrated, a bit rhythmic, a bit not, but he’d spent enough time at live music performances to know when sound came from booming speakers and subwoofers. It was just a different type of vibration.

He felt his pulse quicken, his palms begin to sweat. Maybe, if he just hung back, slowing his pace, the team wouldn’t notice he was missing until they were already in line surrounded by dozens of other attendees. Then, he could slip away and wait for them to finish.

No dice.

Just as he tried to plan his retreat, Justin wrapped an arm around his shoulders. It took him a few seconds to notice that Justin was speaking to him before he could even look at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that.”

“No worries, Whiskey, my dear tadpole,” he said, this time facing Rafa full-on, speaking slowly and over-enunciating his words. Aside from Will, Justin was the easiest on the team for Rafa to understand through lipreading. “This is… a tradition for the team. Every year around Halloween, we seek out what is supposed to be the scariest in the area. Then, we go as a team. It’s the best. Last year… Nursery,” he couldn’t contain his laughter, “a plastic skeleton dropped down from the ceiling and get this… he squealed like a little kid, jumped into Holster’s arms. It was awesome. Though between you and me, I am not going to let him do that this year.” He patted him on the shoulder. “Only I get to do that. But you. You look like a guy who just isn’t afraid of anything. Am I right?”
“Um… what gave you that idea?” Wrong. So fucking wrong. Rafa was afraid of a hell of a lot, but instead of clowns or spiders, his were- yeah. He was afraid.

Justin tapped his nose. “I have like a sixth sense about this sort of thing.”

“Oh, right. I guess I-” but Justin had already moved back into the group, and when Rafa finally took a breath, he realized that his captain had guided him into line. *Puta que pariú*. He couldn’t do this, needed to get the hell out right the fuck now. His eyes screwed shut, and he focused on steadying his breathing. He fumbled for the clasp on his alert bracelet, opening and closing it over and over and over.

It didn’t help.

Maybe if he just told them this whole thing was likely to send him into a panic attack, they might believe him. He felt someone rub his arm in a way that, in the two weeks since someone decided to prank the team, he had come to know meant only one person. When he opened his eyes, Will was staring at him, his brows furrowed but face soft with concern.

He didn’t speak, just moved his hands. *You okay?*

Rafa shook his head before signing in return, slowly to give Will enough time to figure out what he was saying. *I don’t like being scared.***

*I doubt many people do.*

“*You don’t understand; I… can’t go in there,“* and this time, when Rafa spoke, he made sure his meaning came across loud and clear.

Will looked at him in earnest, then hooked an arm around his shoulders and gave him a tight, one-armed hug. Rafa melted into it. He wondered if Will had ever been told he gave amazing hugs. Somehow he doubted it. “I’ll be right here. Okay. I believe in you, man. I know you can do this.”

He wanted to tell him it was silly to have blind faith right now, because none of the team had yet to witness what Rafa looked like when he was abjectly terrified. Still, he remembered the way Vovó D would rub soothing circles on his back whenever he’d wake up from a nightmare anytime after *that* night, the way she would play with his hair as he rested his head on her knee.

Twenty years old, and he still hadn’t grown out of needing someone to help him through his nightmares. If he was being honest, he doubted he ever would. His just weren’t the kind of horrors someone could just… forget.

***

Unlike the pulsing ground outside, inside was a different story. Beneath Rafa’s feet, the uneven floor pulsed in a disjointed staccato of noise and under the weight of dozens of people. It wasn’t a steady buzz, like the way it was at a concert, where the rhythmic vibrations shook right through him and made his blood sing. Those were the kind where he liked to press his body to the wall, his hands to the stage if he could get close enough and let it set his nerves alight. Nor was it comforting the way it was feeling his vovó’s words reverberate through him as they hugged.

This was nothing like either of those.

It was unnerving and contrary, the pulses coming more like blows against his frame. He hated it, and the longer he stayed in there, the faster his heart beat. They turned the corner and shuffled into another room, this one hotter than the others and filled with fog. The orange light he’d seen from outside must have come from this room where the fear the haunted house organizers intended to exploit was the fear of fire.

Fire wasn’t a problem for him. It gave him enough time to breathe, and that was good enough for the time being. Yet, the smoke made it hard to see. Thankfully, as Tony was busy pulling on Eric’s arm, dragging him out of the room as he shouted something Rafa was too far away to read, Will filled him in.

Will handed his phone to him so he could read what he’d typed.

*Tango doesn’t like fire. He said, ‘do you know how quickly you can die from smoke inhalation? Fire is terrifying! What if the smoke alarm batteries are dead? Or the extinguisher doesn’t work?*

Clearly, the fact the fire was fake did little to alleviate his fear. Rafa understood how it could be irrational like that sometimes.

By the time they made it down the crowded, pitch black hallway Rafa was ready to claw his face
off. He knew, just knew the rest of the team handled their blind stumble in the dark much better than he did. He’d never be able to accurately describe it for anyone else, how scared it made him to be surrounded by total darkness in addition to total silence. He couldn’t function, left to the mercy of whatever it was in the dark that he could neither see nor hear.

For as much as he couldn’t sleep without being surrounded by it, Rafa was terrified of the dark.

When he thought the hallway would go on forever, it opened up into another room. Nothing about the space stood out as scary, just looked like a maze of glass panels. He watched his team shuffle ahead and searched around for Will only to see a flash of red hair disappear around a wall.

Somehow, another group had walked ahead of Rafa, and he’d become separated. The haunted house was too noisy for anyone to hear him shout ‘Wait up, guys!’ And then…

The lights went out only to come back on in blinding, bright flashes of strobe lights bouncing off the glass that had somehow become reflective. Immediately disoriented, he tried to find his way around. His hands trembled as they fumbled along the mirrors for the wall. But he just…couldn’t.

He couldn’t hear for a change in music that he could follow to find his way out. His strongest sense remaining, his eyesight, now useless, was just too much for him to overcome. It was exactly the same as total darkness and yet altogether different. It was one thing not to be able to see a damn thing, and another entirely to be able to see and have no idea what it was that he was seeing. How far away were these phantoms flitting about the room? Were they inches from his face or yards away? He had no idea and flinched at every one, waiting for them to collide with his body as he’d so often felt before. Each shadow was a fist from his past landing blows against his skin, and he backed himself into a corner, screwing shut his eyes. The flashes were too bright however, for his lids to block out all the light.

Then, he was back in that hospital after his injury, each pulse of the strobe reminding him of the way the harsh lights slowly came back into focus when the doctors took him out of that induced coma. He’d been terrified and alone, the world around him silent but chaotic, the last sound he’d heard still fresh in his mind…the last sight before he’d fully lost consciousness haunting his every moment.

He collapsed to the floor and curled up into a trembling ball, his face buried in his knees. It didn’t even faze him that he was sobbing as strangers passed through the room. He should have been more clear about why he couldn’t do this.

If he’d simply said, that haunted houses would trigger him, he felt certain no one would have made him go in. If he could just claw the memories out of his head, maybe then…maybe then.

The rasp of his nails dragging along his scalp, and digging in as far as he could without breaking skin, brought him back into the moment only a little, but then a warm hand caught and stilled his scratching. He looked up, the strobe lights once again jarring now that he’d had his eyes closed for a bit, to see Will kneeling in front of him.

There was no point in trying to understand what he was saying; Rafa couldn’t read his lips even if he’d wanted to. Instead, Will pulled him to his feet and into a hug. What really calmed him down though was the way, with one hand he rubbed his back the same way his vovó did, and with the other he carded fingers through the buzzed hair at his nape; Rafa had never told him about that.

Will just seemed to instinctively know, and if he hadn’t already fallen for the guy who had become his best friend, let alone someone he trusted in such a short time, Rafa knew would have.

Hell, he could count on one hand the number of people he truly trusted, and he wouldn’t need half of his fingers.

Rather than continue on through the house after Will released him–sure he was calm enough to move—he led Rafa to the first emergency exit he could find.

The chilly autumn night felt like a godsend on his skin, washing over him in a wave of dried-leaf scented air. God, he loved that smell. Will sat him down on a bench and signed that he’d be right back. Rafa didn’t even think before he reached out and grabbed Will’s hand. He shook his head vehemently.

Will took Rafa’s face in his hands. “I’m just going to get you something to drink.”

“That’s not good. I… don’t!”

To his surprise, Will pulled him to his feet. Okay. He draped an arm around Rafa’s shoulders, and he leaned into the comforting warmth against his arm. Would letting his head rest on Will’s shoulder be a step too far? They didn’t speak or sign as they waited in line for concessions, but when Will pressed the steaming cup of caramel apple cider into his hands with a soft smile, it took a lot of effort for Rafa not to just kiss him the way he wanted to. And he really wanted to, longed to kiss away that curled lip snarl that often crept across Will’s mouth whenever he was irritated, which seemed to be often. Instead, he returned the smile with one of his own and a quiet ‘thanks’.

Once, they were seated again, Rafa set down his cup. He didn’t really trust his voice again yet, so he signed. I don’t like it when I can’t see. I have no idea what is going on then. I can’t communicate; I can’t get away. Being entirely at the mercy of others is not… His hands were still for a long moment. I don’t handle it well. I had a girlfriend for my junior year of high school, and she thought a blindfold would be fun. It wasn’t.
Could you slow down? Sorry, I couldn’t keep up.

Rafa took a deep breath and prayed his voice didn’t shake. “The strobe lights were just too much for me. Sometimes I… when something is…” he ran a hand through his hair. “I shut down. I think it’s safe to say you’ve all inferred that I didn’t lose my hearing because of a genetic disorder or an illness. It was traumatic, and let’s just leave it at that. I wish I could tell you more, but I can’t, not yet. Sorry.”

Will nodded. “You don’t have to be sorry. It’s okay. And, don’t worry, I won’t say anything to anyone else.”

“Thanks. You’re the best.”

Just how much the best was answered ten minutes later when the team exited the house.

“Okay,” Adam said, “which one of you chickened out? Even Nursey finished last year.”

He waited for Will to interpret for him, and before Rafa could say a thing, Will beat him to it. “It was me. The clowns, man. I fucking hate clowns.”

The chirping the team gave him was too fast for Rafa to follow, but it seemed pretty intense. When they all began the long walk back to the parking garage, he got Will’s attention.

You didn’t have to do that.

Yeah, yeah I did. Will’s hands went still for a moment, his brows drawing inward as he thought. Rafa could see the moment he remembered the sign for what he wanted to say, because his eyebrows rose. You’re my friend, and you were hurting.

Thanks.

Anytime. There was something in Will’s face, showing the conviction of his words, that settled every anxious nerve in his body. And when Will casually bumped their shoulders together, it was impossible to miss the way his heart fluttered in his chest. Wait. Oh, oh...whoa.

He was pretty sure he knew what that feeling meant. He had fallen a lot farther for him than he’d realized. Soon, Rafa thought, he’d tell him soon.

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“Nursey, why in the hell did you make me wear this? I fucking hate overalls.” Dex wriggled in his Halloween costume, trying to get comfortable.

Nursey struck his best ‘Blue Steel’ pose before breaking down into hysterics. “Because you were going to come as a Math Nerd. That is the worst idea ever.” He adjusted his headband, part of his costume. As Nursey had told him a few times now, the whole quintet was dressing as characters from Zoolander. He was Derek, naturally. Andre was Hansel with Luis as some character named Megatu or whatever. Yuka was coming as Valencia and Amelia as Katinka- not that Dex would have known any of them by name. He’d seen the movie like once. Whatever.

Dex took off his hard hat. “So you dressed me as Bob the Builder?”

“No. You are Fix-it-Felix.”

“Who?”

Nursey shook his head and continued helping Tango glue question marks all over his green sweat suit. “Looking good there, Riddler.”

Tango fussed with the green, plastic bowler hat on his head. “I feel silly I don’t like superheroes much. That’s Whiskey. He’s the big comics fan. Why didn’t you make him the Riddler?”

“You’re the guy with all the questions. Besides Whisk already had a costume. Speaking of which,” he said, as he lined Tango’s eyes with liner, “where the hell is he?”

Dex groaned, “Stop avoiding the question, Derek. Who is Fix-it-Felix?”

A large hand clapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to see Holster and Ransom flanking him, one captain on either side of him. Their spandex costumes looked both ridiculous and intimidating. More superher-.oh dear Lord.

“Is Bitty seriously dressed as a puckbunny?”

Holster nodded, his face solemn. “He is indeed.”

“Bless those tiny shorts,” Ransom and March said in unison.
As one of March’s green Styrofoam ‘flames’ poked him in the eye, he threw up his hands in frustration. If one more person on his team showed up as a freaking superhero, he was going to scream. Then, because the universe liked to shit on him when he was down, Whiskey chose that moment to walk into the Haus. One of the LAX bros, Ricky, he thought his name was, trailed behind him.

“Oh no! Out! Get out!” Holster shouted, pointing in Ricky’s direction. “No LAX fuckboys allowed.”

Once his phone had transcribe his outburst, Whiskey read, and then cocked his head to the side, sending daggers at Holster. “Are you friggin kidin’ me?” he shouted. “One, fuck you! Two, Ricky here,” he pointed his thumb behind him, “is a cool guy. He’s not a fuckboy. You ever talk to him? Yeah, I didn’t think so. But Ricky’s got something you might want. Three,” his face relaxed a bit, “great costumes. Blue Beetle, Booster Gold, Fire? You three look great.” And then the scowl was back on his face again. “So lay off him.”

Dex blinked at him several times. He’d never heard his accent so thick before.

“What?” Holster laughed. “You sound like Joe Pesci right now. I’m a little afraid you’re gonna whack me.”

Whiskey did not find the attempt to diffuse the situation with humor funny at all. “No, I don’t. He’s from New Jersey. Adam, you’re from Buffalo. Don’t tell me you can’t tell the difference between Jersey and New York.” He rubbed his temples. “Irrelevant right now. Ricky, g’head and deliver the goods.”

“So,” Ricky began, “I want to preface this by saying, Scouts Honor, I had nothing to do with this prank. And please don’t lump me in with the rest of my team. I don’t really like the rest of my team, but I need my scholarship if I want to keep going to school.” He set a couple of brown grocery sacks down on the floor. “They don’t know I’m here, but here’s your stuff back. Sorry, my team is a bunch of assholes.”

Ransom dug through the bag until he found his stuffed lion. “Bourque!”

Around the room, his team rejoiced at the return of their precious items. Holster’s response was not one of happiness. “Dude! What the fuck happened to Lior’s ears? Who the hell—”

“Whatever they did, I took no part in.”

“Don’t care right now. Why would they rip off his ears? Such assholes.”

A few seconds later, Whiskey caught up. “Oh yeah. They ripped a poster in my room and some of my sheet music, too.”

“This means war!”

They continued talking, but Dex heard none of it, because once he’d stowed his grandfather’s lighter safely in his pocket, he couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight of Whiskey’s bicep in his one sleeved costume. Deliciously sculpted and on full display, he damn near ached with how badly he wanted him in that moment. The skin tight pants, tactical bow and thigh holster were killing him. The purple mask and hood, not as much.

Nursey was staring at Whiskey for far too long, and for a moment, the briefest moment, Dex found himself unreasonably jealous.

Knock it off, William. Whiskey’s not yours to get jealous over.

Whiskey noticed the unwavering eye-contact, and pursed his lips, likely pausing a moment to parse out the reason for the gaze. “Got a question, Derek?”

“I thought you couldn’t use hearing aids. Like, I mean you could, but they’d do you absolutely no good.”

“Oh these aren’t real. I made them from a pair of earplugs and foam wire. No way I had the money for a pair of real ones, nor would I spend money on those fake things I see sometimes. Yes, please appropriate and fetishize my disability for your ‘aesthetic’. It’s all I’ve ever wanted in my life. Go ahead and make deafness a fashion statement, but continue treating us as if we’re damaged goods. I’d be fucking honored. Yeah, I’m not down with that.”

“Your Hawkeye costume,” Dex coughed to clear his throat, “looks good on you.”

Whiskey read his phone and smirked. “You should see how good it looks off me,” he said with a click of his tongue and a wink. “Now, let’s get this Kegster started. Cause I am in the mood to school you all in darts and show off my ass in these pants.”

Dex facepalmed. “Oh my God,” he groaned, “this night is gonna kill me, Nursey.”

Nursey leaned over and smushed his cheek with a kiss, and one-by-one the rest of the quintet did the same ( Polyfi Posse, he could hear Nursey saying in his head. Polyfi Posse. Use proper nomenclature, Dexy). “And what a glorious way to go, yeah? I’ll send a funeral wreath to your mother. It will say ‘In memoriam of William J. Poindexter, who died at the sight of a teammate’s ass in tight motorcycle pants. He will be greatly missed.’”

Holster and Ransom wiggled into the middle of their little huddle. “Dex, what do you know about robotics?”

“Who’s a what now?”

“Robotics, you know anything?”
“Not really. I can build a remote but that’s it.”

Holster and Ransom’s faces lit up in mischievous grins. “Great. So say someone was able to snag a key to the LAX house, could you, in theory rig the smoke alarms to go off by remote at various intervals… say like… three in the morning?”

“Probably, but isn’t that potentially hazardous? What if there is an actual fire?”

“No, no. We won’t be tampering with the ones already in the house. Just new ones we hide throughout the house.”

“How are you going to get a key, and how will you get the alarms in place?”

“The answer to both those questions is Whiskey. Kid just showed off a cool party trick. Light fingers on that one.” Ransom shook a key in front of his face. “Snagged this off a LAX bro who snuck in. Dude didn’t even notice. You in?”

“I dunno. Couldn’t we like release several farms worth of ants into the place instead?”

Their eyebrows rose in unison. “Dex, dear, sweet William...Both. Both is good.”

He decided, in that moment, to never get on their bad side, because those two? If they went Dark Side, he was certain would enact world domination in a matter of days.

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Chapter End Notes

Trigger Warning Notes:

There is a brief section of scene one that references some of the verbal abuse Whiskey heard as a child (either directed at him or directed at his mother). If you need to skip the section, you can skip from the time he enters his room until he calls the LAX bros heathens’ (“The trip across campus to the freshman residence hall was short and fraught with stress...The heathens.”) He also talks about his anger issues and how he worries he’ll be just like his abuser (“Forgetting names, no hearing, losing time to flashbacks, the nightmares... all those he could handle...To be like him’ remained unsaid”) if you need to skip that bit.

Scene 3 involves a panic attack as a result of Whiskey not being able to see inside a haunted house, and there is some self-harm ideation (scratching and digging his nails into his scalp- no cutting)

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If anyone wondered, the Anitta that Whiskey has a poster of is a Brazilian popstar you may recognize having performed at the Rio opening ceremony.
Interlúdio de Dorotéia

Chapter Notes

As the chapter title suggests, this is an interlude from Vovó D’s POV. There is a bit of flashback in the beginning. And it all deals with her reactions to the events that sent Rafa to live with her. As such, there is some difficult subject matter, child abuse and domestic violence as well as mental illness discussed from an outsider’s perspective and how she dealt with it.

Please read carefully if this is a concern of yours.

Track Listing:
Scene One ‘Flashback’: “Losing My Religion”- The Reticent
Scene Two: “Far From Home”- Five Finger Death Punch

See the end of the chapter for more notes

November, 2003

There was this phenomena that had existed for those who decided to become parents for as long as there had been parents. From the moment the child entered a parent’s life, no matter how they entered it, whether the result of forty weeks’ gestation, or the hard work of another; no matter when the child arrived, whether as a newborn or say… at eight years old- people always seemed poised and ready to give advice (warranted or not) about parenting.

When Dorotéia first announced her pregnancy, dozens of people had no qualms in telling the young couple about rush of endorphins that would happen the moment they first laid eyes on their child, on their daughter. There were others that told her, she’d be so overwhelmed with emotion that she wouldn’t even notice the pain (liars all of them). Others still, spoke about the fear.

Those people were the most honest, she’d thought. How could her and Thiago be expected to be responsible for another life when they were scarcely older than children themselves? Her parents had told her (in their broken English) she was foolish for marrying so young, that they didn’t come to America for her to get married straight out of high school. They were even less happy when she became pregnant in the beginning of her junior year in college. As far as she could tell, they had gone to their graves still disappointed in her.

The fear… it had not been constant. No, it just lingered in hers and Thiago’s peripheries making them question, even if just for a second, every parenting decision they ever made. It started with the name they gave their daughter after an emergency cesarean delivery. Was calling her Felícia too obvious given the way she entered the world? In the end, she’d won out over her husband, and, just as her name suggested, Luciana became the light of their lives.

Advice came right and left about things like what to feed a picky toddler. Everyone else was convinced they knew the best ways to discipline her child. There were well-meaning words on how to raise Luciana to be confident and sure of herself. Hints came for everything. Everything except when Dorotéia needed it most.

No one knew the right words to say when she found herself faced with the reality of being a widow… at thirty-one. There were platitudes about how he was ‘too young’, and ‘how does a thirty-two year old man have a fatal heart attack?’ Fuck them, she’d had thought. Fuck every last one of them and the subway they rode in on. How was she supposed to raise Lucy on her own? Where were their words of wisdom then? Where were they three years later when her daughter began to lash out? When she misinterpreted Lucy’s cry for help as rebellion? Maybe if anyone had sage advice then she wouldn’t have failed Lucy so badly that she’d come home to a sixteen-year-old daughter sobbing as she told her mother she was pregnant.

But Dorotéia Carvalho Ribeiro Viscaino was nothing if not resilient. They made it work. As much as it made her stomach churn that Lucy’s boyfriend was almost twenty, she knew that pressing charges would only drive her daughter farther away. That was precisely what she didn’t want. It would leave Lucy with even less support than she and Thiago had seventeen years before. Life hands you lemons; make lemonade right?

She felt an enormous sense of pride when, given the circumstances, Lucy graduated high school on time and enrolled in a local community college. She didn’t dare make the same mistake her parents had made and shame her for marrying young. Instead, she took every opportunity she could to tell her daughter just how proud she was of her and of the woman she was becoming.

Knowing what she knew now, she wished she’d risked her daughter’s wrath and called the cops anyway. Fuck, how she wished that.
What no one seemed to tell parents though was how to deal with the absolute unthinkable. No one ever thought to give her advice on how to prepare herself for this type of moment, this moment—when she found herself battered with the realization that she’d outlived her child. They never said how she would feel, at once numb to everything around her and also like her insides were screaming, were on fire as they tore themselves asunder.

What she wouldn’t have given for help an hour ago when officers knocked on her door at eleven p.m. to offer condolences and a ride to New York Presbyterian because it wasn’t enough for fate to steal her baby, but it was trying to steal her baby’s baby as well.

It was a funny thing, this feeling, Dorotéia thought, as she walked through those long, pristine hallways, her feet moving on her own accord, because she certainly was not in control right then. Life had never seemed as cruel as it did at that moment, expecting her to mourn a life she’d helped create, a life snuffed out far, far too soon. Twenty-four was too young: so young and who had so much left ahead of her. But…

Did she really?

In her anguished mind, she wondered if the Fates, when they measured out the thread of someone’s life, ever felt sick to their stomachs as they cut a lifeline that wouldn’t even reach a quarter century. She hoped they did; she hoped the nausea debilitated them as they agonized for days about their actions. Maybe then someone else might feel a modicum of what was coursing through her mind and body right now.

She’d love nothing more than to give into her grief, but just like she had over a decade before when death snatched Thiago away, she had someone else depending on her to be strong in the face of adversity. Who, she wondered, would be strong for her, to allow her to break down while they shouldered the burden of putting on a brave front for the world?

No one. She had no one to fill that void in her life.

In that waiting room chair, one hour became two, became, four, became a number of hours she’d lost count of until a doctor came out in surgical-green scrubs. His face was grim, his shirt bloodstained, as he said they’d done all they could. The rest was up to God.

God! She laughed, wetly, at the doctor’s words as she took it all in. Where the hell was God before all this? Where was God when her family needed help? Was God there when the doctor’s shirt was bloodied in the first place?

Would it have been too much to ask the doctor to change before coming to give her an update? No child should ever bleed that much.

That was when the weight hit her, the soul-crushing weight of failure. She, too, had done all she could to help Luciana. Yet, even helping her daughter get the courage to finally leave her husband, helping her to get that restraining order didn’t save her. She’d failed her daughter. Would her help save Rafinha? Something in her gut doubted it.

The strength to walk into that ICU room took a Herculean effort to muster. Every shuffling step from that waiting room to Rafael’s door was made with cement shoes. Try as she might to keep her breath even, to keep calm, the sight of her grandson’s broken, little body lying there in that hospital bed that dwarfed his tiny frame proved to be her undoing. Wires connected him to machines she knew the purpose of all too well. Though his head had been wrapped with gauze, wounds stitched, fractured bones mended with pins, screws, she could still see the bruises, could still tell where his head had been shaved for surgery.

Her knees buckled under the shock, and it took a couple nurses to get her seated safely at his bedside. His fingers sticking out of a plaster cast were cold, and she covered them gently with her own. The hiss of the ventilator taunted her, and the steady beeping of the cardiac monitor and EEG did little to calm her. Being a healthcare professional herself made things worse. When she looked at those screens, she knew what all that data meant. She knew what the fancy jargon meant on Rafinha’s chart, where words like ‘Flail chest, longitudinal sternal fracture, myocardial and pulmonary contusions, hemothorax, depressed comminuted fracture of left temporal bone’ weren’t a foreign language to her.

The more she read, the more her heart ached. How anyone could intentionally harm a child, let alone their own child, destroyed any remaining faith she had in a higher power.

November 2015

The car lurched as the train pulled to a stop, and Dorotéia stretched her stiff limbs while she sat in her seat. She should be itching to exit as soon as possible, but she found a familiar dread creeping in on her. It was an old friend by now, or an acquaintance at the very least. She was a woman of science, and right now she was Schrödinger’s cat; the train was the box containing her. The longer she remained in this seat, the longer she could pretend the possibilities of what she’d find when Rafa met her on the platform didn’t exist. Either he was flourishing at college more than their conversations would let on, or he wasn’t. The latter would break her heart, but the former scared her in that maybe he wouldn’t need her anymore.

Lucy had reached that point too, where she didn’t need her mother, and that was when things truly
get scary.

The dread had been there just like she had when Rafael’s doctors said there would almost certainly be some level of brain damage, that it would be a medical miracle if there wasn’t. When they laid it all out for her, fully detailing his horrific injuries, they gave her a list of probable prognoses. It was hard to fathom how “Severe to total hearing loss” could be the best possible outcome.

As if that was any kind of good news.

Dread was there when she had to watch him endure months of physical therapy, when frustration at needing to relearn things he’d mastered by two years old reduced him to a crumpled heap of sob’s on the floor, when he would have meltdowns worse than a toddler’s tantrum because he no longer understood how to interact with his world. Sullen more days than not, he seemed more like a spectator of his life than a willing participant. Vacant eyes and silent tongue. He could still speak, the doctor’s assured her of that. Still it took six months for him to say a word other than the terrified ‘Mamãe ’ she heard him scream when he first regained consciousness. That was all it ever was, a boy’s desperate call for his mother.

And she, as fiercely as she loved him, was not his mother.

The fear was there with her as she shook, staring down the face of the man who tried to take everything from her. If he felt any remorse for what he’d done, it surely didn’t show. She’d been sitting there, eyes wet like most of that courtroom, when her poor Rafinha had to relive what he could remember just to bolster the prosecution’s case, even though the physical evidence should have been more than enough to put that monster away forever. She’d been haunted by the way Rafa froze on the stand the moment he saw him. Unlike her, he didn’t shake, but he didn’t blink either. The room was near silent, and Rafa’s whimper, tiny like a kitten’s mewl, gave a gut-wrenching echo. It had taken a two hour recess for her to put him back together enough to retake the stand. She suspected his initial reaction was the actual nail in the defense’s coffin, that nothing Rafa said spoke as loudly to the jury as that broken sound did.

By the time that first night back home rolled around, the panic and her went hand in hand. No longer under the nightly assistance of sedatives, Rafa was powerless when the monsters- wait, just one, tormented him while he slept. Those screams had ripped her from a sound sleep, just like they had most nights since. She’d held him, offering futile words of comfort she knew he couldn’t hear. It was both for his benefit, and for hers. He had clung to her shirt like she was a life-raft and he was adrift at sea. Those nights, she’d still be there in the morning, having slept sitting up with Rafa’s head on her lap because he couldn’t bear to sleep alone.

Too many of those nights in a row led her to a half-formed idea which, in turn, led to a solution of sorts. To keep him company in the hospital, and then the inpatient rehabilitation center, Dorotéia bought him a stuffed bulldog he named Paulo. Whether it helped or not during that time, he never said. Yet, seam ripper in hand, she opened up the plush toy. After removing some stuffing, she added that pulsating insert that mimicked a beating heart. It had taken dozens of phone calls to specialty doll shops and manufacturers to find one that didn’t simply make the sound of a heartbeat, because what good would that have done? She made sure to buy a gross of them— that hadn’t been cheap— just in case one broke. Rafael squeezed the dog so often, she found herself replacing the batteries every two weeks. Back then, she was sure she was singlehandedly responsible for keeping Duracell in business. Yeah, the anxiety she was failing her grandson as well was there then, too.

Would she make the same mistakes with him as she had when raising her daughter? Would he resent her for not being his mother, for not helping them get away faster (though the latter was not for a lack of trying)? Her fears were allayed when Rafa had hugged her and thanked her for not sending him away the way He threatened to do so often, to dump him on the street with only the clothes on his back. Knowing that didn’t make her feel much better though. Her sweet Rafinha was a child, just turned eight when He had found their new apartment and decided to disobey that restraining order. He was only eight when his world fell apart.

She couldn’t even refer to Him by his name anymore. That man was merely a pronoun in her head. In all honesty, even a pronoun was too good for the monster.

Though Rafa still called her Vovó D like he always had, she had long since moved past thinking of him as her grandson. No, he was her son, just as he was according to the State of New York, the adoption removing all trace of Him from his name. Yet, to refer to Rafa as such, felt like a disservice to Lucy, like she was replacing her. Though he’d never confessed as much, she suspected he felt the same, and that was the real reason he still called her grandma.

The dread, the fear remained when recovery changed, giving way to anger when heated words like ‘I hate you!’ and ‘You’re not my real mom!’ came her way followed by a slammed door. Rafa’s therapist had assured her many times over that though he directed the lines at her, they were not about her. He just lashed out because he had nowhere else to direct his anger, his pain. Dr. Martinez explained that children acted out when they felt safe in their environment, that Rafael displaying his anger meant she was providing him with a secure and loving home, something he’d lacked before he and his mother fled. Dorotéia understood, of course she did; it didn’t take away the sting of the things he’d said.

Anxiety had scratched at the surface of her mind until ten minutes later, Rafa would come out of his room clutching Paulo, his face stained with tears. He would hug her as tightly as his shaking arms could. His apologies were heartfelt; they always were, but he never promised her it wouldn’t happen again, because they both knew it would, because they both knew he couldn’t help it. He was grown now, and still had moments like that. Though he seldom came out of his room crying, and though he seldom yelled at her the way he had when he was a child, he snapped at her, much like a striking cobra. He would stop moments after he said whatever hurtful thing that had come
out of his mouth. His features would twist in remorse, and he’d apologize, acknowledging how he was wrong to take it out on her.

A familiar friend of her fear, guilt came along for the ride on occasion, when she would find herself resenting her grandson for making her life so difficult. She should have been able to enjoy her middle-aged but, to go out with friends who, themselves, were empty-nesters and embracing the freedom that full-time parenting had seldom offered. She had none of that. In those days, she couldn’t even remember the last time she’d had a night off because trusting someone else with Rafael was not a luxury she afforded herself. Even only if for a night. Whenever she felt that resentment creeping back in, it always had her running to the bathroom to empty her stomach. How, how could she think that about her sweet Rafinha? None of this had been his fault. Luckily, those days were few and far in between. She wasn’t sure how she’d live with herself if they were frequent.

Though guilt didn’t come around all that often, doubt followed her every move.

Fear collided with her head-on when those angry outbursts turned into something worse when Rafa started losing time. As long as she lived, she would never forget the way her stomach dropped out as she turned around on the crowded sidewalk to see him staring straight ahead with empty eyes, body unnaturally still half a block behind her, oblivious to the world. People moved to walk around him and continued on their ways, but he didn’t move. It was as though he was no longer part of the world in which he lived, just a motionless statue. She could see the little rise and fall of his chest, his shoulders, as he took tiny, shallow breaths. The vacant staring became eyes darting back and forth and muttered words she couldn’t understand. What was wrong; how could she help?

That wasn’t the first time she’d found herself struggling with what to do; it would not be the last. Not by a long shot.

Whatever other options had gone through her mind at that moment, she chose wrong. Her well-intentioned hands on his shoulders sent him stumbling backwards, his hands clamped over his ears to drive out the haunting sounds of phantom screams. She knew then; she knew before they exited the subway car on their way to an emergency therapy appointment. She knew what Dr. Martinez would say. Dorotéia worked in healthcare and had seen her share of trauma victims. She knew what it looked like, but watching it unfold as a neutral third party was far different than witnessing it in a loved one.

She knew, but it didn’t alleviate the fear any.

Because it was there, stronger than it had ever been when that four-letter diagnosis hung in the air above their heads, a psychological sword of Damocles, that would forever change the way they lived. Rafael would always be subject to its cruel whims and inconvenient triggers wondering if any new experience would set him off. She would be witness to the utter confusion as he came back, wondering where the hell those last twenty minutes, thirty minutes, six hours had gone.

No matter how much treatment helped, he’d still be afflicted. She, on the other hand, would watch him struggle, watch him suffer from an outsider’s perspective, knowing that for yet another thing, she’d never understand how he felt. There were too many burdens she couldn’t carry for him, and it ate away at her.

When he came home sobbing and distraught at thirteen, she’d been afraid he’d found himself at the wrong end of a schoolyard fight . . . again . She found him, crumpled in the corner of the laundry room, wedged between the wall and the washing machine, his head in his hands. She’d knelt in front of him, and slowly pried his hands from his face. This time, though, this time was different. It didn’t take noticing the lack of bruises or a split lip for her to see that. She didn’t even need to ask what happened before he started talking, not with his words, but his hands. That was something he did when he was really stressed. Someone (she knew exactly who that someone was without Rafa giving it away. Devon Chandler. It was always Devon Chandler and his group of friends) had picked on him, for what, Rafa wouldn’t say. They’d called him names, called him stupid, called him dumb. Rafa hated that last one, and when he’d tried to correct them, insisting that he was not dumb that he could speak just fine, their taunting turned cruel. They’d said he’d never get a girlfriend. No girl would want ever want him. Why would they want a freak like him, when they could have a real man.

Real man. Dorotéia detested the phrase. He’d probably been called a real man before, and look at the atrocities that man had been capable of. Did it take a real man to abuse his family, to murder his wife to beat his child nearly to death, or did it just take a coward?

As she had done so often since Rafa had come to live with her, she tried to soothe his wounds with comforting words depicted by caring hands. That day had been different. He was less upset by what Devon had said than by what had been omitted. She confessed that she did not understand him.

‘What if I don’t just want a girlfriend?’ he’d asked. ‘What if want a boyfriend, or a girlfriend, or a special someone? What if what body someone has doesn’t matter to me? What if I just want a beautiful person whoever that might be? Is no one going to want me?’ She took his hands, pulled him to his feet, and when he’d calmed down, they talked in-depth about what he’d meant and how he felt. She’d assured him that someday there would be somebody that would look at him and think he was magic, the most beautiful person they’d ever seen. They would want to know him and want to love him. She promised that his recent discovery about himself changed nothing about how she felt about him, that she loved him exactly as he was, would always love him, would fight for him, and support him. She only wanted him to continue to be good person, and happy.

He’d wiped away the tears in his eyes and nodded, giving her a rare, full smile, complete with dimples. To be honest, when he smiled like that was the only time he looked anything like her.
They’d shared a package of Bis and watched *Farscape* (his favorite until *Switched at Birth* came around, but aliens and humor would never hold a candle to positive representation)

Dread wasn’t around much that day.

But it was around, stronger than ever when she received that phone call at work one night. She was on her string of mandatory third shifts and when her phone rang a little after midnight as she enjoyed a hot cup of coffee, she assumed it was Rafa checking in. That was their rule, he could have a later curfew on Saturday nights so long as, if she was still at work, he called her when he arrived home. He’d been impeccable on it up until then.

However, Rafa’s voice was not the one to come through the phone once she answered. Instead, his girlfriend, Ana’s frantic voice saying they’d lost him coming home from the movies. One moment he was there, holding her hand, the next… he’d bolted. As Dorotéia pressed for more detail, Ana confided that they’d walked past a couple having a heated argument on the sidewalk. The man had thrown an empty beer bottle at his girlfriend, his aim terrible in his drunken state, and the bottle had hit Rafa. Seconds after that, he was nowhere to be found.

The five of their remaining group had looked for the better part of an hour, couldn’t believe he could have gone so far so fast, but they were out of options. Ana asked if she should have called the cops before now, and Dorotéia had wanted to scream ‘Yes!’ but yelling at a sixteen year old girl would do no good.

It took her two hours to get someone to take the rest of her shift after she’d called the cops. They had her come down and make a statement, told her to go wait and home with an officer. Her stomach churned with fear, growing more turbulent with each hour that passed. When those hours became six, twelve, eighteen and more, she began to brace herself for the worst.

A child missing for over twenty-four hours, even a sixteen year old child, had little chance of being found alive. She couldn’t stomach the idea of burying Rafael too. Not again. There was nothing she could have done in a past life that would warrant her that sort of karma.

Three days, it took three days for that phone to ring again. But at least it was a phone and not officers at her front door. A couple of transit cops had picked him up for jumping a turnstile at the Brighton Beach Station, and he was being checked out at NY Methodist.

What in the hell had Rafa been doing in Brighton Beach when they lived in the Bronx? Why would he ever jump a turnstile? He got in fights a lot at school, but he was a good boy not a criminal. She knew she’d taught him better than that. Too many people in the world would look at him and see a crook before ever getting to know him, would hear his name and assume he dealt drugs. Such was the racist way of the world. He needn’t prove those stereotypes correct.

Her heart stopped as soon as she saw him sitting on the hospital bed. His cheeks windburned, dehydrated. Though a state appointed interpreter and CPS advocate sat with him, the former relaying everything the advocate said, he just stared ahead with eyes devoid of any life. She would learn minutes later, that he failed his psych evaluation. Somewhere in his three days wandering, he’d lost his alert bracelet, and the only reason they’d known to call her at all was because of her missing person report. They recommend a seventy-two hour hold, and she’d agreed.

When after another three days, he still had not come back out of his head, still demanded to see his mother, was still trapped in his eight-year old mind, she signed the paperwork for inpatient treatment.

Six weeks alone at home felt like an eternity, and it was at that point she finally broke down and sought therapy, though it would take much longer to get a handle on the fear. Especially when Rafa came home and his anger was stronger than ever, but this time? It was all directed at her. How dare she send him away like his dad had always threatened to do! He’d screamed at her, punched a hole in the wall, thrown things (even if it was only a pillow), told her he hated her.

In those moments, she’d never been more afraid in her life. *Not for her life. No. Just afraid she’d lost him, that he would never trust her— or anyone else for that matter— again. It was then that she believed she’d failed as a parent for the second time.*

She hadn’t lost him after all.

Nor it seemed had she lost him now, as she stepped onto the train platform. The Rafael in front of her was far different than the one she’d dropped off in Massachusetts only six weeks before. This one, her Rafinha, stood taller, his eyes shine brighter. He smiled, genuine and true, the happiness reaching his eyes, even if that ever-present sadness and anger still lingered in the near black ring surrounding his chestnut irises. She doubted those two emotions would ever leave, not entirely.

His arms, though they hugged her tightly, didn’t feel as heavy as they so often had. Even if it was only her projecting onto him, she didn’t care. Whatever the reason for the metaphorical lightening of the weight on his shoulders, she’d take it.

The two friends he’d brought with him walked ahead, with the red haired one she knew was Will pulling her suitcase.

*I’m so glad you’re making friends. You look a lot happier.* -She signed.
I am.

What changed? Or is it just having friends for a change?

He pointed ahead of them to where Will complained about an obnoxious professor. I think I'm in love.

And for once, the fear that had followed her since that horrible night twelve years ago was nowhere in sight.

Chapter End Notes

Since I currently have none of chapter 9 written yet, it will probably be two weeks before the next update. Just a heads up.
Chapter 9

Track listing:

Scene 3: "Spark" - Digital Daggers
Scene 4: "Elastic Heart" - Written By Wolves cover (original by Sia)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rafa offered up a tiny smile at the sight of Will and his parents embracing on the Haus’ front lawn as they said goodbye. It was a bittersweet kind of grin, knowing that he’d bid farewell to Vovó D earlier that day with a tearful hug at the train platform. Will’s dad, who sported a similar level of gingerness as his son, reached out and ruffled Will’s hair. The action earned him a playful shove from Will, and Rafa couldn’t help the pang of envy that filled his gut in that moment.

Their relationship was the kind of father-son bond everyone should get, the fact his own experience was far, far from the same loving one Will and his dad shared was enough to almost make him angry. But, he was a big boy, and so, he sucked it up and attributed that feeling to a human yearning to be loved.

Fuck Daniel Anderson, fuck him and his parents who were so adamant in their son’s innocence that even when faced with the mountains of evidence to the contrary, never once reached out to Rafa, their grandson to see how he was doing. Never once had they visited him in that hospital or tried to speak to him since. He just couldn’t understand how they could abandon him like that.

Yeah, fuck them too.

His spiral into anger and resentment was interrupted by the crashing of a small body into his legs. Glancing down, he saw Will’s sister, Hannah hugging him tightly. Her windblown, strawberry blonde hair obscured her face, but he could feel her smile nevertheless. He extricated himself from her grasp and knelt down so he could see her better.

Small hands hurried to move the hair out of her eyes, and yep, he’d been right. She sported a blinding smile.

It was nice to meet you, Hannah.

She nodded and began to sign in response. You too. It's neat that they let you play on their team even though you can’t hear.

Her words stung a bit despite their innocent meaning. She was just happy to see him treated like any other kid. 'Any normal kid,' his brain told him, but he shrugged it off.

Hey, Hannah. If you want to play on a team, don’t let anyone stop you. Okay? You are just as good, just as smart, and just as capable as anyone else. Got it?

Got it. She gave him another hug and climbed into the Poindexter family car where her mother was waiting to make sure she buckled properly.

As they drove off, Will bumped into his shoulder. He turned to him.

She likes you.

I know. It’s weird. I don’t have a lot of experience with kids, Will.

It's cute. I think she might have a little kid crush on you. He signed before clapping Rafa on the back

I think it might be a bit of hero worship really. You know, representation and all. I am named for a Ninja Turtle after all.
Will rolled his eyes at him and threw a good-natured body check his way. *It was cute that you played along.*

Rafa burst out laughing, so hard that he doubled over, grabbing his sides. “I wasn’t lying.”

Will straightened at deadpanned. *You were not named after a cartoon turtle.*

“Well,” he said, placing a hand on his shoulder, “I most certainly was named after a cartoon turtle. My mom... she was a geek. Loved superheroes. Where do you think I learned about comics from? Apparently, when she was a kid told Vovó D that when she was all grown up she was gonna have a baby named Rafael or... Well, I was almost named Michelangelo. You should be happy.”

Will’s eyes went with a mix of shock and disbelief. “No!”

“Well, I usually just tell people I was named after the painter, but with the Portuguese spelling. It tends to shut the up quicker.”

***

“Would you be quiet?” Dex hissed at Chowder. “Honestly, I can’t for the life of me figure out why Holster sent you with me. I love you, dude, but you wouldn’t know stealth if it bit you in the ass.”

Feet starting to fall asleep, he shifted his position inside the LAX House attic where he, Chowder, and Whiskey were putting the finishing touches on their “prank to end all pranks.” The light from Chowder’s laptop and the flashlight Whiskey had shining on the small robot Dex had built were the only lights in the room.

Ransom had decided that just after sundown was the best time to implement phase one of the prank, because at best, there would be only two guys in the house. Plus, darkness lent a sense of cover and disguise to their clandestine mission.

As it turned out, the key Whiskey had lifted from one of the LAX bros only opened the side door into the garage, not the actual house. But that was okay, better, if you asked Dex, which of course no one did. Right outside the door into the house was an entrance to the attic. It was a happy accident.

He tapped Whiskey on the left leg, their silent cue for him to hand him a screwdriver, Phillips to be exact. See, in the dim light, they both knew Whiskey would be little use to the mission if he couldn’t see to read lips or signs. So the pair of them worked out a complex series of tactile gestures to enable him to assist the mission, which was, at the moment, installing a remote switch and alternate smoke alarms in several places in the attic.

“Okay, Chowder,” he whispered, “see that circuitboard right there?”

“Yes.”

“When I say so, drop it in place. On three. One, two, three.” He watched as the small circuit board connected, as indicated by a small green light. On the laptop, he entered a command and delighted when the indicator lights on all the smoke alarms turned on. “Success,” he said, throwing his hands into the air in excitement. Then, he grabbed his phone, swiping across the screen to write a note for Whiskey.

*You ready for phase two?*

“Yeah.” Whiskey patted the backpack on the attic floor. “You two head on out of here. I got this.”

*Don’t you want a lookout? How will you hear someone coming?*

Whiskey rolled his eyes at him. Or at least, Dex thought he rolled his eyes. Difficult to say. “Well, you forget I’ve been in this house before. The floors are crap. I can feel them creak. And also, if someone is coming, I’ll hide in Ricky’s room. He’ll understand.”

*Please let me stay and help.*
“Fine. Hey, Chris You wanna head back to the Haus and give progress report?”

Chowder lay a hand on each of their shoulders. “Be careful, guys.”

Quietly, the three snuck across the attic so they could help lower Chowder down to the garage and make sure he got out okay. Once the door shut and Chowder was outside, the pair scurried back to the other attic opening; this one into the house.

How do you want to do this?

“Well, they’re more active where it’s warm. So I thought release them in the laundry room first, then some in every bedroom but Ricky’s,” Whiskey said, sliding the hatch out of place. Would it have been too much to ask for an attic with a ladder? Instead, they had to lift the board out of the way, and the first guy up had to pull himself into the space on strength alone.

Dex nodded, and was about to just hop on down when Whiskey moved him out of the way, hanging out from the attic opening upside down to check the scene. Satisfied, he dropped down, landing on the floor with ease and nary a thud. It was odd and intriguing to him, because Hannah had what his mother called ‘elephant feet’. With Hannah unable to hear how loud she was walking, even the dead would hear her approach.

He shook himself out of his thoughts and followed Whiskey out of the attic. However, Dex landed a bit off-balance, teetering a bit before ultimately falling. Crashing into Whiskey would be more accurate. Embarrassed at the way he caught him, both hands still on his upper arms, Dex blushed a furious shade of red.

You know that moment right before a lightning strike, when the air tingles and your hair lifts from the static? Well, there in the upper hallway of the LAX house was a moment right before the strike. The air between the two of them was so charged with tension, so- God Dex didn’t know how else to describe the brief seconds as both of them stared at each other, both cast fleeting glances at the other’s mouth and back up again.

If only he were braver, he would have closed the distance. But logic got the better of him. There was no way he was declaring his feelings with for him with a kiss inside the damned lacrosse house, not with Whiskey carting around a container of three hundred crickets and a homemade stink bomb.

No way in hell.

So he stepped back and handed Whiskey a screwdriver, watching as those light fingers he’d learned about opened the vent in the hall with as little sound as the guy had landed on the carpet. Honestly, it wasn’t fair. From his backpack, Whiskey pulled out a glass jar and several capsules which he dropped in the liquid and slid into the vent. Then, he stood and signalled for Dex to follow him into the third door on the left.

They released several crickets inside every room on the upper floor but one. Ricky’s room.

In there, he watched Whiskey take a thick sheet of plastic sheeting and seal off both the intake and exhaust vents in Ricky’s room. Apparently, the backpack also contained a space heater and a draft blocker for his room, one of the kind that you slid over the bottom edge of the door to keep out the cold air. Whiskey left a note on Ricky’s desk apologizing and telling him if the smell gets through he could come crash at his place. There was also a can of air freshener and a set of ear plugs. Hopefully that would be enough.

Once back in the hallway, Whiskey splayed a hand in the middle of Dex’s chest, a sign for him to wait there. He then, snuck downstairs, checked the coast and released the rest of the crickets. Moments after he’d left, Whiskey was back upstairs pulling him towards the attic opening.

Since he had the better upper body strength, Dex gave Whiskey a boost before pulling himself back up into the attic, and they hurried across the room. They were into and out of the garage in about ninety seconds.

Finally back in the safety of the Haus, they were greeted with high fives all around and an exasperated eye-roll from Bitty.

Holster wore a mischievous grin and drummed his fingers together like an evil genius supervillain. “Comeuppance, my friends, thou art a cruel mistress.”

On his way to the Haus, Rafa readjusted his backpack strap slung over his right shoulder. He needed to take some photos of pose references for a final project in his Intro to Fiction class and figured his teammates would make good models for superheroes. With reluctance, his professor had okayed a graphic story instead of just a ten thousand word short story. Thank God.

It wasn’t that he thought he couldn’t write that many words. He could; he knew he could. It was just... well, his stories came alive more when he put art with them.
However, his trek to Frat Row was derailed when he walked past a grove of trees near the Lake Quad and saw Will sitting alone, staring out at the water. Even one of the Chad’s would have been able to see that Will was upset. So Rafa padded down the path, stopping next to his friend.

“Want some company?”

Will looked up at him, his amber eyes red rimmed and posture sagging. Instead of answering, he merely shrugged, but then followed that up with a small nod of his head. Rafa set his backpack up against a tree trunk and plopped himself down on the pile of leaves, using his bag as a pillow. His phone, he placed on his thigh, listening app open and running.

“Are you okay?”

No. Not really.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Not much to say, I didn’t do so well on a coding project. Like...my professor hated it. And I need to do well, to be exceptional in my family. I have to...be better. Or else...

Rafa waited, sensing that there was more Will wanted to say but perhaps didn’t know how. So he waited, and waited, and he waited. Finally, after more than five minutes with Will sitting speechless, Rafa reached out and placed his hand on the fallen leaves in hopes that maybe Will would see it for what it was, a comforting gesture, and take him up on it. Yet, Will didn’t move.

Oh well. He tried.

Content to sit in mutual silence, seeing as he’d been sitting alone in silence everyday for over a decade, Rafa looked out over the water. A group of ducks, a hen perhaps and her ducklings that had hatched in the spring, swam around in the water. He wondered when, or if, that anatine family would migrate for the winter. The chilly, November weather was a bit gloomy, windy; he wished he wore more than his sweater and undershirt at the moment. How Will wasn’t shivering in just his long-sleeved henley, he wasn’t sure.

Beside him, Will took a deep breath before exhaling with a huff. Rafa recognized this as a sigh. Clearly his friend was distressed, and he longed to be able to help him, to wrap him up in a warm embrace. Maybe then he’d be brave enough to say the words that had died on his lips, died at his fingertips so many times before. There was no ‘think’ about his affections anymore. No, now he knew.
He loved him, but he just didn’t know how to tell him. There was a moment that night in the LAX house where he thought, if only for a moment, that Will had been about to kiss him, and looking back on it now, he wished he’d made the first move.

On his leg, his phone screen flashed, and Rafa looked down.

If I’m not better, more successful than everyone else in my family, I don’t think I will ever be able to come out. My uncles… well let’s just go with they have less than kind things to say about ‘the guys’.

Finding out Will was gay did not really surprise Rafa. After all, as someone not straight himself, he had become good at noticing that look of guilt someone had when caught staring at person society told them they shouldn’t. Furtive glances of hidden longing were something he knew pretty well. Since he couldn’t rely on audio clues, when it came to being observant visually, he was a master. “So you’re gay?”

Rafa winced. That was the best he could do? So you’re gay?... Someone just hit him over the head right now..

Yeah. That bother you?

“No. I’m...well...I like hot people, people with beautiful hands, nice lips. I don’t really know what I am, I just know I’m not straight and dating isn’t something I do or seem to want often. I’m just me, I guess.”

He glanced over to see Will’s shoulders shake with laughter.

I’m glad you’re you.

“Thanks. You need a hug or something? I mean, I don’t know if my ‘comforting’ hugs are any good, but offer still stands.”

Will shook his head and signed. No, I’m good. Hungry though.

“Come on.” Rafa stood, dusted off his pants, and extended his hands to pull Will to his feet. Later, he would kick himself for the way he squeezed Will’s hands with his own, enjoying the callused roughness that came from working with one’s hands. He, himself, had a pretty good one from where he held his pencils and markers when he drew. Still, there was a paradoxical mix of strength and gentleness in Will’s hands. Rafa should know, he’d benefited from both several times now.

Where are we going? Will asked once he was standing, hands free from Rafa’s grasp.

The indoor Farmer’s Market over off Jason Street and Elmwood is open for another hour. I’m gonna feed you, and then, you and me are gonna watch the Rangers’ game.

Ugh really? Why the Rangers?

He rolled his eyes at him. Really? Hometown team, and even if they weren’t my favorite team since I was a little kid, I have like the biggest crush on King Henrik. The things I would let that man do to me.

He didn’t give Will a chance to protest further, instead choosing to throw an arm around his shoulders as they walked. Any time he felt Will’s posture begin to sag, Rafa gave him a little squeeze of reassurance. It was all he could do without wrapping him in a tight hug... and never let him go.
“Dude,” Whiskey said as he lay sat on their air mattress in the middle of the Haus living room floor, “I know you think you’re woke or whatever you want to use to describe yourself, but stop.”

Dex—lying next to him and growing annoyed with the conversation that he couldn’t leave because, per Whiskey, Shitty was impossible to lipread thanks to the ‘stache—groaned when Shitty once more tried to steer the conversation towards social justice ideas. “Yeah, are you sure you want me to interpret that for him? Think real hard about your answer.”

Shitty took another drag of his joint, offering it to Dex who declined. “Yeah. He’s like doing himself a disservice.”

He sighed. *He says when you call yourself disabled you are displaying internalized ableism. Please don’t hate me for relaying the message.*

Whiskey’s eyes turned into daggers. *Hate you? Never.* “Fuck you, dude. You don’t get to define how I label myself. If I had been born deaf, maybe, maybe you would have a point. I wouldn’t know anything different than I had always been. But that’s thing. I do know different. I know what I’m missing. Ergo, I feel I am disabled. Does every person who has lost their hearing feel that way? Hell if I know. But I do know that it’s not my place to decide that for them. So, like I said. Stop, before you piss me off. And I really don’t want to get mad. I’ve had like a seriously fucking good day; don’t fuck that up for me.”

Seeming to sense the need to diffuse the tension in the Haus, Holster extricated himself from the tangle of limbs that was his, Ransom, and March’s cuddle pile on the giant floor cushion, and stood. “Enough of this. It’s time for this slumber party’s team bonding activi—”

“He says when you call yourself disabled you are displaying internalized ableism. Please don’t hate me for relaying the message.”

“Excuse me, if it’s team bonding, why is Mr. Shitty here? Or Farmer and March. I don’t understand.”

“Oh you sweet summer child, Tango,” Bitty sighed. “Once a teammate, always a teammates, and significant others are honorary members.”

Holster rolled his eyes. “Right. Anyway, so we are gonna play Karaoke Roulette.” He caught the microphone Ransom tossed at him.

A chorus of groans broke out around the group.

“No, stop that. We’re doing this. We’re all doing this, either solo or with others. So right, the roulette part means we pick the song for you.”

Dex quickly interpreted for Whiskey.

“No.”

“Yeah no objections allowed.”

Dex rolled his eyes. *You have to participate he says.*

“No. I’m not singing.”

“Don’t be a downer, Whisk.”

*Yeah, he says not to be a downer.*

“Think about it, Adam. If you pick a song I’ve never seen sheet music of or heard back when I still could hear, how the hell am I supposed to know what to do? It’s not like just being unfamiliar with the song. I have to know the song if I am gonna be able to sing it, and I haven’t sung in front of anyone since I was almost eight years old.”

“Would you participate if you could sign the lyrics?”

*He wants to know if you will sign the song instead.*

“So long as I get to pick the song. The grammar of ASL is not like English. There’s a lot of
Holster looked at him. “Fair enough. Now everyone take two pieces of paper. On one write a song name on it. On the other write your name, or if you are gonna sing as a duet or group, write that down. We’ll draw names from this hat,” he said as he grabbed the shark beanie from Chowder’s head.

“Hey! Be careful with that. Cait made it for me.”

Dex chuckled as he interpreted for Whiskey before writing down his selection and name.

“Songs we’ll draw from Ransom’s snapback. I have RedKaraoke’s party app ready to stream to the TV. We’ll all sit on the floor under the tv, so whoever is singing can see the screen, and we can see them. Any questions? And we are not going to heckle during the performance, and it would make Rans and I a lot happier if no one chirped anyone either. This is a teambuilding exercise, and making fun of each other isn’t going to help that. Got it?” When no one complained, Holster read through the song choices, adding each to a playlist for easy access. “This is the song you want to sign, Whiskey?” He held up the paper for Whiskey to see.

“Yeah.”

“Oh. Okay. I’ll keep this one out of the hat then okay. You want to give one for someone else to sing?”

Whiskey shrugged and wrote down another. Within moments, the game, as Sherlock Holmes would say, was afoot. The first few performances were neither anything to write home about, nor were they ear murder. That is…

Until Shitty drew “I Believe in a Thing Called Love” and everyone in the room envied Whiskey for being unable to hear him. Though with the way Whiskey was chuckling, Dex deduced that the guy might have actually heard the song before he went deaf. Still, it was cruel and unusual punishment to listen to. Hell, Shitty trying to tackle The Darkness could be used for psychological warfare and be the most effective weapon ever. But, thanks to Ransom and Holster’s decree that they couldn’t make fun of anyone- although, to be fair, this was a teambuilding exercise, and Shitty had graduated.

Dex settled on chucking a throw pillow at him instead.

Ransom’s rendition—thanks to Shitty—of “Smoke Two Joints” was loads better. Still, Dex felt really bad for choosing the most “Dad Rock” song he could think of just to spite Nursey, when poor Chowder had to sing “We Didn’t Start the Fire.” He’d have to buy the guy dinner for sure.

“Oh God. No, you three are not allowed to sing that song! It was like the karaoke gods smiled upon you and gave you something you actually wanted!” Ransom groaned.

“It was my addition to the hat,” March said with a wink. “Lucky break.”

Dex wasn’t sure he’d ever heard the song before, but given the artists involved, it was right up Bitty and Holster’s alley, and when the pair of them plus March began to discuss who would sing what part, he noticed the beginnings of butterflies forming in his stomach. He was supposed to go next.

March’s, high alto snapped him from his thoughts, “…See anybody can be bad to you, you need a good girl to blow your mind.”

Then the Trio of Blondes—their group name, not Dex’s idea—sang the chorus in unison. He thought that he might have heard Bitty play the song once before at least, but still couldn’t be sure, even through Bitty’s verse. In fact, he only vaguely recognized it until Holster started his bit, pushing the other two out of the way (part of the performance, all for show. Of that much, Dex was sure), “You know what, bros? Let me show you how to do.”

And yep, he indeed knew this song. Huh, who knew Holster could rap? I sure as hell didn’t. As they wrapped up their performance of “Bang, Bang,” Holster and March both winked when they sang “Back, back seat of my car,” to Ransom. Dex was sure he could see the slightest flush of pink tinge his cheeks. There was a considerable amount of applause, and no way, there was no way he could do this.

A hand found its way into his hair, and he looked over to see Whiskey smiling at him. You can do it, Will. I know you can. You’re faith in me is inspiring, Whiskey. He signed with a roll of his eyes and an exaggerated huff.

The hand messing up his hair dropped down to his shoulder and gave him a little squeeze. Good. That’s what I was going for.

Misplaced faith was what it turned out to be when he pulled what he could only assume was Whiskey’s addition to the hat. “Jesus Tapdancing Christ,” he groaned. All things considered, it could have been worse. When he sang, it could sound like a dying cat the way Shitty did. At least he had that going for him, but he was not well versed in heavy metal, and this was gonna be a disaster.

“...Somewhere, between the sacred silence and sleep, disorder, disorder, disorder.”

He didn’t even wait for the group to clap before he flopped onto the floor and rolled over to hide
his face, grumbling about how someone should just kill him now.

“No, can do, there Dexy,” Nursey said as he lay with his head in Luis’ lap. It had to be tough being in a relationship with four people when three of them were athletes and the other a musician. Dex couldn’t remember the last time he saw the five of them together at once. Then again, it was probably less common to feel lonely when you had four other people you could go to for comfort and intimacy. “I would have to get a new roommate then, and I dunno...I’ve really started to like you. Your tidiness is growing on me.”

“Oh I see how it is. You’re only my friend because I keep the room clean.” He winked at him.

“Heads up, Dexy. Whiskey’s about to start.”

Dex sat up, watching enthralled as Whiskey’s fingers danced to the music, and though he knew it wasn’t true, he felt like the performance was just for him, because he was the only other person who knew exactly what Whiskey was saying. This song, he thought he knew damn well. Bitty and Holster were both big Sia fans, but he’d never understood the song as much as he did watching Whiskey sign it. See, Dex had always thought it was a break-up song, but the way Whiskey chose to interpret it, change up lyrics to suit his needs, the look of hurt anger on his face when he signed that he wasn’t broken and still fighting for peace- left a bit of a bad taste in his mouth. Why? Because that wasn’t the look of a scorned lover. It ran deeper. It made Dex ache right with him.

There was a moment after the first chorus, when he locked eyes with Whiskey, and the only way Dex could describe it was magic. Pure magic. It was as though Whiskey was baring his soul to him, letting him in on a great secret. But then the guy had to go and change the tense on the fourth line of the second verse from ‘I’ll walk,’ to “I’ve walked through fire to save my life” and Dex wasn’t sure what to do with the knot forming in his stomach.

Still, it wasn’t until Whiskey, almost as though he was no longer thinking about anything at all, began to sing the chorus as he signed. Stunned, Dex leaned forward and hung on his every word. He wasn’t sure what he expected Whiskey to sound like when he learned the guy liked to sing, but having a decent voice without being able to hear a single note was not it. How did he do that?

His wonder was short lived, because Dex found he couldn’t tear his eyes away from him and the raw emotion with which Whiskey sang. He supposed it came from ASL, where facial expressions were so important. And yet...

It was like this, for Whiskey was more than just a song. It seemed resonated with him, resonate within him.

Dex understood that signing wasn’t a perfect translation, but when the words Whiskey sang no longer matched at all, Dex tried to parse the meaning in what his hands were trying to say.

...elastic heart, but your blade used to be so sharp. I was a rubberband until you pulled too hard. And I might still snap if you get close. But you’ll never see me break apart. Now that I’ve got an elastic heart.

Whiskey was out of breath by the time he stopped singing, and the invisible weight Dex knew he carried around on his shoulders seemed a lot lighter. No, this wasn’t just a song for him, not by a long shot. This was a catharsis.

And it had been gorgeous.

Rather than let the team begin to clap and ruin the almost sacred silence that had settled over the room, Dex held his hands in the air above him, twisting them back. He nudged Nursey with his leg and leveled him with a look that said, “Do what I’m doing.”

As one by one, his sign for applause caught on around the room, Whiskey stood there, chest heaving, floored by the response. A slow spreading smile took over his face, and because Dex had scarcely blinked since Whiskey’s performance began, he saw the damp glint in his eyes. Whiskey smiling like that, purely happy, entirely free even if just for a moment could stop a war, and the sight of it was what finally did Dex in.

He loved him. There was absolutely no doubt in his mind now.

When Whiskey flopped down on the air mattress beside him, Dex shook his shoulder until he got the hint and sat up.

Thanks for that, Will. Showing the team how to silently applaud. I... thanks.

Least I could do.

I can’t believe I actually started singing. God, I hope it didn’t sound too terrible for you all.
Are you kidding? Dex looked over and grinned at him. You have a good voice. How do you do that?

Well I have the sheet music, and I have an app that tunes you sing. If you think that was cool, you need to look up Mandy Harvey. She’s a jazz singer and Deaf too. She’s amazing.

Whis- He stopped himself. If ever there was a moment to use his real name instead of hockey nickname, this was it. Rafa, that was beautiful. Like that song was written just for you, about you. Can I ask you something? It would bug him forever if he didn’t find out the answer to the question kicking at the front of his mind. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.

Whiskey licked his lips and nodded.

You changed the lyrics. What you sang was not even close to what you signed. Tenses and meanings were different. Why?

Beside him, Whiskey sat motionless for a long moment.

Did you do that for me? Because I would be the only who would know what you were saying? It felt like it was for me.

Once more, he nodded.

Dex took no less than four deep breaths while he pondered his next words carefully. Is there anything you wanna talk to me about? I mean… Here went nothing. I get that they were metaphors, but the meaning is pretty clear. So… Whose blade was sharp? Who pulled you too hard? Who… hurt you?”

He gave Dex a wet laugh but said nothing.

I’m sorry. Not my place. Don’t worry about answering that question. I shouldn’t have as-

Whiskey reached over to stop Dex’s rambling hands, locking eyes with him and holding his gaze. Then, he tapped his chest twice, moving his thumb to his forehead, palm open.

Whoa. It was hard for Dex to accept, that Whiskey had been hurt at all, let alone by someone who was supposed to love him. But there it was.

I lied. Before, when I said I didn’t know where he was. I know *exactly* where he is. Just not something I like to admit.

He’s in jail isn’t he?

Yeah.

Good. Means he can’t touch you again, right?

Whiskey nodded, and Dex watched his chest rise and fall several times before he began to sign again. Can we talk about something else? I’m in a good mood, and talking about that is just gonna kill it. It’s not a pretty topic, and I kinda fall apart over it. I’m an ugly crier.
Sure. Look, Rafa, you don’t ever need to tell me any of that if you don’t feel comfortable.

Whiskey gave him a crooked grin. God, your signing is getting so much better, Will. I’m proud of you. You’ve been working so hard.

Thanks.

He sighed. But...I *do* want to talk to you about it. I… trust you. There was a brief moment where Dex thought Whiskey wanted to say something else, but instead settled on ‘trust you’. Would it be too much to get his hopes up and believe Whiskey felt the same about him?

Just not here, not now, not today, Whiskey signed before laying his head upon Dex’s shoulder.

Still in shock over the glimpse into Whiskey’s past, it took Dex almost a minute after the fact to realize Whiskey had kissed him on the cheek right before laying his head on Dex’s shoulder.

No, it was definitely not too much to get his hopes up.

Chapter End Notes

The sign Whiskey makes at the end of the chapter is for ‘my dad’

For more info on Mandy Harvey:

- Personal Website
- Video NBC Nightly News
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So this was originally supposed to be a longer chapter, but I had to split it because it was becoming a monster in length. And I am the worst when it comes to responding/replying to comments on AO3. I let them accumulate until the inbox number scares me....and THEN I respond. Apologies

Also a bit of content warning about scene 4...Dex’s extended family are bigots and say bigoted things.

****Now With transcription for image text****

Track Listing for Chapter

Scene 1 & 2 “Spirit Cold”- Tall Heights
Scene 3: “My Immortal”- Lindsey Stirling (Evanescence Cover)
Scene 4: “Black Honey”- Thrice

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rafa dipped into the bin of Arabica beans and poured a heaping scoop into an open paper sack. He took a deep breath, savoring the heavenly aroma lingering in the air above the open barrels of bulk coffee. God he missed their market when he was up at school. Stop and Shop was no Fairway; that’s for sure. Even with Vovó D sending him monthly care packages, the coffee she included never seemed to last long enough.

Speaking of his grandmother… where in the world had she gone? Stowing his coffee, he wandered off in search of her only to find her staring at the deli meats with dismay.

“You look overwhelmed, Vovó.”

She turned and looked at him, visibly sighing. They are out of linguiça, and I know how you like your feijoada with that over chouriço. But… they don’t even have fresh chouriço, and I do not want to make another trip today. I just want to go home and get to bed. I am not looking forward to that double shift tomorrow.

Rafa reached out and lay a hand on her shoulder.

No worries. Maybe we can try it with something new… like kielbasa?

She opened her mouth as if to call his selection blasphemous only to be interrupted by someone approaching. Given that she turned her head in that direction, Rafa gathered the woman had called her name. His suspicions were confirmed when the two began talking, or rather, the woman talked and Vovó D couldn’t get a word in edgewise to stop her. He tried briefly to lipread, but whoever this woman was, she spoke like a damn auctioneer.

He snuck his hand into his pocket and pulled out his phone after a minute more wherein his grandmother wasn’t able to stop and introduce him.

I haven’t seen you in ages, Dottie. Since Lucy was a baby. Are you still working at MacDougall General?

He arched a freshly threaded eyebrow. Dottie? Who in the hell called Vovó D that? No one called her that. Everyone, except him called her Dorotéia, and he did mean everyone. His heart ached a little at this woman’s mention of his mother. The holidays... as with most people who’d lost loved ones, were hard for him. He missed her hideous Christmas sweaters and making cookies with her. Though Vovó D and him still cooked and baked treats together, it wasn’t the same.

He glanced down at his phone once more.

Dottie, I didn’t know you had a son. Who’s this handsome young man glued to his phone? I tell you, teenagers. They’re all slaves to their technology. Why I can never get Maddie off hers. Always on Twitter.

He gritted his teeth. “Well, this slave to his phone is deaf and you talk too fast to lipread.” He turned around his phone and showed her the screen. “And you never stopped talking long enough for Vovó D to interpret for me.”

Then, this woman, to whom he still had not been introduced, turned to him and checked off box number two on his top ten pet peeves list. He read as she spoke, patronizingly slow, head moving forward with each word as though she were punctuating it.

Vovó D, she just spoke louder didn’t she? And very slow like I’m an idiot, yeah?

His grandmother simply nodded.

“Yeah, I said I was deaf, not stupid.”

“Barbara, this is my grandson Rafael. Rafinha, Barbara used to go to school with me,” Vovó D
said before signing her words for him.

“Oh my God, Dottie. I can’t believe you have a grandson about the same age as my Maddie. He’s what? Seventeen.

“Twenty.”

“Looks like Lucy got busy early just like you.”

Rafa wondered if Vovó D would be disappointed in him if he flung a maracujá from his grocery basket at her. In the end, he settled for running his fingers along the smooth skin of the fruit, but he strongly considered throwing one. Oh well. It would have been a waste of a good fruit.

“*But we should totally set them up. One date should be fine. Maddie turns eighteen in a couple months. They’d be so cute together.*”

Before Vovó D could answer, he stopped that line of thinking right there. “Yeah, I’m standing right here, and I’m... not interested. Nor am I available. So...” He gave a wave full of forced politeness before excusing himself to go and finish their shopping.

The letter he’d written Will, and hastily stashed in his suitcase before winter break weighed on his mind. Had Will found it yet? What did he think? Did he feel the same as Rafa did, want to be with him too? He hoped. God how he hoped.

As he read down the shopping list, he made some additions of his own. For example, right after he found the cassava flour for the pão de queijo they would have for Christmas Eve dinner, he made a detour down the international food aisle. There, he grabbed several packages of Bis and dropped them into his basket.

When Vovó D found him nearly ten minutes later, he had finished grabbing the remaining items they’d needed. She tapped him on the shoulder, startling him.

“Sorry, anjinho. I thought you saw me walking up.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have everything on the list.”

She looked into his basket and pulled out a package of candy. “I don’t recall seeing Bis on the list.”

“I was upset. He signed with a smirk. “Ol’ Babs there thought I was dumb. And Dottie? Really?”

Vovó D broke out in contained laughter. “Yeah, I never could stand that nickname. And Ol’Babs was always best in small doses... very small doses. But, don’t think I didn’t notice your little lie to her. *Since when are you not available? Something you wanna tell me? Finally tell Will how you feel?*”

“Oh it was a lie, sort of. I may be single, but I’m not... emotionally available. I chickened out and wrote him a letter. He hasn’t told me he found it yet. So... but hey now. You should be happy I only lied to her. I wanted to throw fruit at her.”

She looked once more into his basket. “And waste one of your precious maracujá? Sure. I’ll believe that when I see it.”

“Come on, Rafinha. If we hurry, maybe we can catch an Express.”

***

Dex shivered against the chill of the harsh wind and pulled his knit cap down over his ears. From the small shed buttied against Uncle Frankie’s house, he grabbed what remained of an open hale bale, hefting it over his shoulder. The four inch dusting of snow was just enough for his boots to sink down with a crunch while he tramped his way over to the small blue house with the red shutters off to the side of the yard. With his free hand, he opened the fence gate.

He clicked his tongue loudly against the roof of his mouth several times. “Heya, sweetie. I got a treat for ya!”

From inside the shelter, he heard Bernice bleat softly, followed by a giggle. The door was ajar and when he tagged it open the rest of the way, he smiled at the sight of Hannah lounging up on the lofted area of the house snuggling up to his goat.

Hannah turned and waved when she felt the draft of cold air wash over her.

“Hey, Hannah. His hands moved, using the gestures for ‘ladybug’, her namesign. Whatcha doin’ in here? Cold out.”

Uncle Scruffy’s here. I don’t like him. He smells funny.

She had a point there. Uncle Gianni, or Scruffy as the guy preferred to be called, camy and ex-con extraordinaire, sometimes showed up to crash at Uncle Frankie’s reeking of stale cigarettes, as if the house didn’t already have enough people in it. He bit back his anger at his family’s current
living situation.

Fucking economy.

Instead, he crammed the goat manger as full of hay as he could and climbed up on the loft with them. He’d built the goat barn with his dad when he first got Bernice years ago. Thank God, they’d only built it on top of the yard and not anchored into a concrete slab, because when the whole Poindexter clan had to move into his uncle’s house after the recession cost Dex’s father his job, they’d have had to build another one. And he’d really been proud of it. It looked like a little playhouse but big enough for him to stand up in. The point was, he knew the loft was sturdy enough to hold the three of them.

He reached out and rubbed Bernice’s tummy as he pulled out a paper bag of apple slices and potato peels. “Lookie what I’ve got for you, Bernie. Your favorite.”

Bernice gobbled up the scraps, making sure to lick his fingers clean too.

“Who’s a good goat? That’s right, Bernie is.” When she licked his nose, Hannah started laughing again.

_Bernice is silly, Will._

_I know. She’s the best. You wanna come back inside though? It’s too cold for you to be out here too long._

_But Bernice isn’t cold._

_Yeah, well she’s got a fur coat, and her hair is hollow. That means she stays nice and warm in here. You, he poked her in the nose, do not have a fur coat. You don’t wanna be sick for Christmas do you?_

_No! She signed, her face lighting up._

_Come on then. You and me can hide out in my room and watch a movie._

_Can we build a blanket fort?_

_Sure._

Once inside the small bedroom he shared with his older brother, Henry, Dex got to work, rigging up long strands of yarn—tied to the closet rod, tied to the rung of the bunk bed ladder and so on—until he had a fine framework on which to build their fort. Finally, colorful blankets draped over it delicately, hanging down and creating a secret clubhouse (as Hannah had called it before skipping out of the room to go find a movie)

_Please don’t be Frozen again. Please don’t be Frozen again._

_Oh thank God, he thought, when she returned with Lilo and Stitch. Honestly, if he had to sit through Frozen one more damned time, he was going to puke. One could only stomach hearing “Do You Want to Build a Snowman” so many damn times. The worst part, Hannah had no clue how annoying the song was to listen to, so it wasn’t as though he could explain why he hated the movie so much._

_Good choice._

_She curled up into his lap as the movie began to play on his laptop. However, about twenty minutes into the movie, she turned around._

_Hey, Will?_ 

_Yeah, ladybug. What is it?_ 

_So David wants to be Nani’s boyfriend right?_ 

_Well yeah. He really likes her._ 

_How can you tell?_ 

_See how he smiles and wants to be around her? Help her? Is really nice to her?_ 

_Yes. Her fingers went still for several minutes, and he thought that was the end of it. She was five. Little kids did that sort of thing: ask random questions for no reason. But then, she started signing again. So… is Rafael your boyfriend then?_ 

_His brain scrambled at her question. How had she- No. Why would you ask that?_ 

_Well you want him to be, right?_ 

_He floundered, momentarily terrified that the rest of his family could read his sexual orientation as plain as fucking day. The last thing he wanted was for him being gay to result in his uncle kicking the family out of his house. Look, he wanted to come out, desperately, but he also didn’t want his parents and siblings... and goat to be homeless. What kind of selfish dick move would that be?_ 

_Why- How…_
When me, Mama, and Daddy were visiting you at college, you looked at Rafael like David looks at Nani. So, David wants to be Nani's boyfriend, and you want to be Rafael's boyfriend.

He sighed. You got me. Yeah I do.

Cool. You'll have a Ninja Turtle for a boyfriend.

So it seemed she was still clinging to that notion. Hey bug, you think you can keep this between you and me?

I love secrets!

Rather than say anything else, he hugged her tightly. It felt good to know he had someone else on his side beside just his dad, not that having his dad in his corner wasn’t awesome. The man was quite possibly, no without a doubt, the best dad on the planet, and Dex was lucky to have him. So what if bad economy had cost him his job and the family their lodgings. A lesser person would have been too proud to damn near beg his brother-in-law for a job and place to live. Even though his dad hated working for Uncle Frankie in the auto shop, he still did it. There was no one Dex admired more on the planet, but Hannah was a close second.

And no, not because of any of that ‘it’s so inspiring how you persevere with your disability’, crap. It was the way she didn’t let things stand in her way. Neither bullying, not difficulties learning because she couldn’t hear, nor the way the extended family couldn’t really communicate with her stopped her from being the most amazing little kid he knew. For that alone he admired her, but the way one of her hugs could obliterate a bad mood was even better. People like that just made the world a better place by being kind. Bitty and Chowder were like that. Hannah was better at it.

He kissed her hair, and they continued watching in peace.

***

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me,” Rafa grunted as he rose up on his tiptoes to reach a box inside their assigned closet in the co-op’s basement storage room. “How the hell did she get this up here in the first place?”

The box of Christmas decorations had been wedged underneath and in between several other boxes and plastic totes. No matter how much he tugged, the container didn’t move.

“She’s like five foot three. I bet she had help from Mr. Morricone in 12J. Honestly,” he pulled with great force, “she should just ask the man on a date at this point. Make him dinner or something. They’re fooling no one”

Using both hands, he managed to shift the boxes surrounding the one he needed just enough for it to come loose. With one last yank, he freed the box... and the one on top of it which came crashing to the floor, vibrating the floor beneath his feet on impact.

“Filho de puta!” All around him lay a bunch of scattered pictures and papers. Rather than sort through the mess in the cramped quarters, Rafa hastily shoved everything back in the box and stacked it atop the one filled with decorations. Curiosity scratched at the forefront of his mind the entire elevator ride to the ninth floor. The building manager really needed to contact someone about replacing this damn thing. Slowest elevator in the world.

Once inside their unit, he looked around the empty apartment. In order to be able to spend time with him over his break, Vovó D had been taking as many extra shifts at the hospital as possible since Thanksgiving. As such, she hadn’t decorated for the holiday at all. Briefly, he decided to skip it all, but the colorful decor and lights added a comforting warmth to the place. Since she hadn’t even had time to buy a tree, he dug through the decorations until he found a large spool of ribbon and taped a zigzag pattern on the living room wall. After coloring the cutting out several paper ornaments, sticking them to the ribbon, he considered it a good enough of a surrogate tree and moved on.

One empty box of decorations and two hours later, the apartment looked sufficiently Christmas-y, so he strolled into the kitchen to get started on Christmas Eve dinner. However, once inside, his eyes fell upon the now mangled box from the storage unit and his curiosity got the better of him. Underneath dozens of his elementary and middle school art projects that Vovó D had kept (and he felt bad for his haste resulting in damaging them. She’d obviously saved them for a reason) were family photos. Most of the pictures were of the two of them, but here and there he found photos of his grandfather Thiago, from whom he’d got his middle name. It struck Rafa, just how much darker his vovô’s skin had been from his own. Since he’d never met the man, it was easy to forget that Thiago had been of Caingangue and Afro-Brazilian descent, yet it was another reminder of why Rafa hated it when people assumed and then called him white. As with so many people of Brazilian heritage, he was multi-ethnic. Vovó D once describe him as moreno-claro, or little brown. Why did he have to be cursed with his father’s skin tone?

Sure, Rafa acknowledged it lent him an air of white-privilege until people learned his surnames. Then all bets were off. Still, he’d prefer to at least look the part rather than be told he was appropriating Latino culture by people who just needed to mind their own fucking business. He had spent so much energy rejecting his whiteness simply because the idea that identifying with anything having to do with his father made him physically ill.
He shook himself out of his negative headspace and returned to the contents of the box. The sight of one picture in the pile was like a punch to the gut. In it, his mamãe’s face smiled back at him, a squirming bundle of newborn Rafa in her arms. Lovingly, he traced his finger along her smile. He missed her. Hell, he missed her every single day, and it was an ache that had never faded, never dissipated, despite how much people had promised it would.

Lies.

Her loss hurt just as badly as it did twelve years ago. Feeling tears begin to well up in his eyes, he had to stow the picture. Underneath it in the box, however, was a yellowed envelope with the words

Para Rafinha, no seu 18º aniversário

His fingers shook as he picked it up, because he knew that handwriting, had seen it on sticky notes in his lunchbox every school day for two years, saw it on birthday cards, Christmas presents, and a lump formed in his throat, one he couldn’t swallow down. Carefully, he slid his index finger under the flap, hissing when the paper sliced through his skin. He shook out his finger before pulling out a similarly colored sheet of paper.

Meu Amorzinho Rafael,

I wrote this letter when you were only six hours old, and already the center of my whole world. You were seven pounds, four ounces of perfect with a full head of brown hair. Mamãe says you look like me, but I hope you have her smile.

You’re reading this letter today on your eighteenth birthday, and even though it is eighteen years in the future, I know you are on your way to becoming an amazing adult. Over the months I carried you, I dreamt of what kind of man you would be. I hope you have your abu’s voice. You’ll never get to meet him, but he sang like an angel.

Meu filhinho, I hope today is filled with love and happiness. I am sure we are sitting around a table, debating your choice of colleges while we wait for your dad to come home with birthday cake. I bet you have my sweet tooth, though hopefully not my problem with cavities. I never could say no to a package of Bis when offered.

By now, I am sure you have heard less than positive things about me, about how young I was when you were born. I hope you were able to take them with a grain of salt. I had a choice when I learned about you, and I chose to keep you. Please don’t think I didn’t want you. From the moment I knew, I wanted you, and even though Mamãe and I didn’t get along in the year before, she supported me, even when I was afraid she would kick me out. She didn’t tell me I was bad for winding up pregnant, only voiced her concern that I would have to drop out of school to raise you. She didn’t want that for me, she wanted me to get a good education, to succeed. That is my hope for you, Rafinha. Maybe you’ll be a doctor, or discover the cure for cancer. Maybe you won’t, but whatever you decide to be, I know you will be great at it.

Maybe by now, you have met that special girl and are in love. If so, I hope she treats you as well as I know you will treat her. Maybe you haven’t yet, and that’s okay. So long as you are happy, then I am happy for you.

Félix aniversário con amor,

Sua mamãe

[Image text: Meu Amorzinho Rafael, 10/14/95] I wrote this letter when you were only six hours old, and already the center of my...
whole world. You were seven pounds, four ounces of perfect with a full head of brown hair. Mamãe says you look like me, but I hope you have her smile.

You're reading this letter today on your eighteenth birthday, and even though it is eighteen years in the future, I know you are on your way to becoming an amazing adult. Over the months I carried you, I dreamt of what kind of man you would be. I hope you have your avô's voice. You'll never get to meet him, but he sang like an angel.

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Maybe by now, you have met that special girl and are in love. If so, I hope she treats you as well as I know you will treat her. Maybe you haven't yet, and that's okay. So long as you are happy, then I am happy for you.

Feliz aniversário com amor,
Sua Mamãe

By the end of the letter, he couldn’t breathe, his chest so damn tight with emotion he was convinced he was dying. Those tears that had welled up in his eyes when he saw his mamãe’s photo, streamed down his face, leaving little saline dots on the paper. White-knuckled fingers gripped the countertop as he fought for air against the paralyzing pang of grief. In the end though, anger won out, and he shoved the battered box off the kitchen counter with such violence a storm of papers fluttered to the ground all over the kitchen. Clutching the letter to his chest, he slid down the refrigerator door to the floor in a sobbing mess.

All at once, he was overwhelmed with sorrow and seething with rage. He yearned for one of her hugs and simultaneously hated her for being gone and missing everything, for not being brave enough to leave his dad earlier, for failing to protect him, which in turn made him feel worse, guilty for his emotions. How dare the last time he saw her be his strongest memory of her! What a hellish nightmare it was seeing her unblinking empty gaze staring back at him as she lay there in a pool of blood while he fought through the pain just to breathe, just to survive! Because no one should be cursed to remember that sight every night for years. She was gone, and he was a mess living in a silent world, and it was her faul-

With a sob, he sucked in what he was sure was an audible breath. He clawed at his scalp, uttering a string of apologies as he scolded himself, “Stupid, Rafa. It’s not her fault. It’s his fault. Stupid, stupid, stupid!”

And so, he continued his inconsolable weeping there on the kitchen floor until exhaustion won out. There was a brief moment where his eyelids were too heavy to keep open, but he managed to stumble to his room and grab his heavy comforter off his bed, dragging it to the kitchen. He curled himself up in his blanket as he cleaved to the letter and picture of the two of them and drifted.

Which was precisely how Vovó D found him when she arrived home from work hours later. Her gentle nudging on his shoulder, amidst the mess, roused him, and he blinked up at her through puffy eyes.

What happened, Rafinha? Dinner ready?

“Desculpe-me, vovó. Eu tentei, mas foi um dia ruim,” he said, sitting up and gesturing to the mess before handing her the letter and photo. “Eu encontrei estes e...”

Her eyebrows drew together in a familiar expression of pain. “I see,” she said, and he could read her perfectly.

“Sim, eu sei.” He sighed. “Sorry, I ruined Christmas dinner... by not making Christmas dinner”

She leaned forward and kissed his hair. Don’t worry about it, anjinho. Come on, I think we have a pizza in the freezer. We’ll make dinner tomorrow night. She looked around at the mess. How about I take care of these papers, and you go clean up?

You don’t...I made the mess. I should be the one- She reached out and covered his still shaking hands.

No. I think it’s probably better for your right now if I do it. I want you to be able to enjoy the rest of the night. It’s okay, Rafa. I promise.
“No, Diana, I don’t care if they are tax paying citizens. It’s disgusting, and I don’t want to see that anywhere near me or my children! And I think they should reinstate DOMA.”

“Oh go fall into a black hole, Pasca!” his sister, Diana sneered at his cousin.

Dex ducked Pasquale’s poorly aimed dinner roll that sailed over his head and hit the wall behind him. Though he couldn’t be sure, he was pretty sure the bread was meant to hit his sister, but his cousin was shitfaced at this point. As they resumed their squabbling, Dex gritted his teeth as he pushed a scoop of potatoes around his plate.

His uncles, aunts and cousins had been at it for the last twenty minutes, all the while he (and the rest of the Poindexters other than his oldest sister) sat around the dining room table in uncomfortable silence. Uncle Frankie had a problem with taxes and the Democrats “trying to steal his businesses” and Obamanacare being the work of Satan. His cousins Dom and Dario railed about the Black Lives Matter movement and all Muslims needing to be deported. Aunt Rosalia had just wrapped up a five minute tirade over Starbucks’ holiday cups and the war on Christmas (mind you, he couldn’t recall the woman attending mass even once in his lifetime. Pot meet the fucking kettle). Great Aunt Cece had a field day when explaining that her tax dollars were going to be used for comprehensive sex-ed in her school district. So he was already on edge by the time they started debating the recent legalization of gay marriage.

For the first time in his life, he actually wished he was deaf just like Hannah, because no one was bothering to interpret at the moment. His parents, most likely (and rightly so) had decided the subject matter inappropriate for a five year old, and the rest of the family were too self-absorbed to care. God, how he wished he could’ve heard the way his family was jumping down each other’s throats right now. ‘Cause nothing said Christmas dinner like hearing your family thought you and people like you were disgusting and deserved to be treated as second class citizens, even if no-one except his dad realized they were talking about him. As a matter of fact, his father on several occasions had opened his mouth to speak, but Dex had leveled him with a glare that said, ‘Don’t. Please don’t’

But when someone, and he didn’t know nor did he fucking care who it was, started dropping slurs, he’d had enough. For the first time in his life, he actually wished he was deaf just like Hannah, because no one was bothering to interpret at the moment. His parents, most likely (and rightly so) had decided the subject matter inappropriate for a five year old, and the rest of the family were too self-absorbed to care. God, how he wished he could’ve heard the way his family was jumping down each other’s throats right now. “Cause nothing said Christmas dinner like hearing your family thought you and people like you were disgusting and deserved to be treated as second class citizens, even if no-one except his dad realized they were talking about him. As a matter of fact, his father on several occasions had opened his mouth to speak, but Dex had leveled him with a glare that said, ‘Don’t. Please don’t’

But when someone, and he didn’t know nor did he fucking care who it was, started dropping slurs, he’d had enough. So, it seemed, had his parents, but he was quicker to act. “You’ve got to be kidding me. You all were about to declare war on Starbucks over holiday cups destroying Christmas when the stuff you are saying is far more unchristian-like than a freaking coffee cup. And for the love of God, can you stop with the slurs? I mean was your bigotry not obvious enough that you had to resort to pejoratives?”

“What slur? Fa-”

Dex held up his hand to stop Dario from finishing. “Yeah, that one’s pretty bad,” and it was. It hurt like hell to hear, but someone needed to intervene on Hannah’s behalf. I meant ‘dumb’. I know my parents have asked you repeatedly not to use that one.”

“I don’t get what’s the problem with-”

“It started as an insult for people who didn’t speak. You know what group got this word used against them a lot?” He emphatically pointed at Hannah. “The Deaf community, and people still use it to wrongly describe non-speaking deaf persons... like Hannah! So stop.”

“Relax, Billy. It’s not like she can hear us.”

“A) way to be an asshole, Dario. B) I hate that nickname. And why do you all have to argue constantly? Do you like coming off as the perfect embodiment of the stereotypical Italian?”

When his mother opened her mouth to speak, he beat her to point and waved her off. “I’m done, Mom. Sorry.” He pushed his plate away from him and stood up. “I’m not hungry anymore.”

He stormed off to his room where he grabbed the nearest pillow and chucked across the room with a silent shout. Just being in the same room as his extended family was exhausting. Rather than throw himself upon his bed where anyone could find him and disturb him, he grabbed a blanket and opened the window. From there, it was only a four foot climb onto the roof, and a well placed kick downward to close the window. Though it was fucking freezing outside, it was far warmer than the atmosphere inside.

With his breath forming white clouds every time he exhaled, Dex stared up at the clear night sky. There was no way. None at all. He would never be able to be himself around them, but given where they lived, Dex worried his bottom lip between his teeth as he wrestled with the realization that he wouldn’t even be able to confide in his mom and siblings as long as they stayed with Uncle Frankie. And that? That sucked, because while he was unsure exactly where his brother stood on gay rights, he at least would treat him civilly if he didn’t agree. He scrubbed both frigid hands down his face.

Fuck this situation.

His ass had just started to go numb when he heard the window shimmmy open.

“I thought I might find you out here,” his dad said as he sat beside him and draped another blanket around both their shoulders. “I, um, fortified this. Don’t tell your mother.” He passed Dex a thermos. “Here you are. Special recipe courtesy of yours truly.”

Dex bumped his shoulder against his dad’s before taking a sip and wincing. “Ooh, that’s hot.”
And then the hot cider bit his esophagus on the way down. “And strong. Wow.”

“Yeah, thought you could use the stiffest of drinks. So Fireball Hot Cider it is.”

“Thanks.”

His dad reached over and tousled his hair. “I’m sorry.”

“No. No, Dad, no. You don’t need to apologize. We’re not in a position to stop them from saying anything.”

“Yes, I do, William. I should never let you be subject to that.”

Dex took another drink. “But say you did call them out. They would know you were trying to protect one of your kids, and I can’t.” He took a shuddering breath. “I can’t be the reason you all get thrown out of Frankie’s house. The younger kids-. I can’t.”

His dad wrapped an arm around his shoulders and gave Dex a firm squeeze. “Yeah, but you’re my child too, and you don’t deserve to hear stuff like that from anyone, let alone family.”

“But they don’t know they’re talking about me.”

“Well…” his dad nodded, pausing for a moment. “Thank you for standing up for your sister. That was good of you, putting someone else’s needs before your own, but God, William, I wish you’d put yourself first for a change. You may be a bit of a hot-head, but you are a good person, who cares deeply about those he loves, and you deserve more than what happened in there.” His dad patted his knee. “I have something I want to show you. What do you say we go for a drive, get out of this stuffy house?”

“Dad, we’re already out of the house.”

He poked Dex in the nose. “Don’t sass me, William.”

“Sorry, sorry.”

Once inside his father’s old pickup truck, only slightly nicer than the beater he himself drove, Dex relished in the warmth. Houses illuminated with colorful lights passed by in a blur as he stared out the window unwilling to break the comfortable silence between them. It was nice. He always could spend time with his dad, neither one of them saying a word, and it never got awkward.

Eventually though, he wanted know what his dad had wanted to show him that was so important they leave the house on Christmas. “Where are we going?”

“Nowhere really. I just wanted to get you a comfortable distance away from them.”

“Dad, the roof was a comfortable distance.”

“Remember what I said about sassing me?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Patience. Only a few minutes more.”

When his dad pulled the truck to a stop in a parking space near Payson Park Community Garden, they both took a minute to admire the night lights over Back Cove. Then, his dad switched on the overhead light and took folded paper from his inside coat pocket. “This fell out of your duffle the other day when I was doing laundry,” he said, handing it to Dex. “I stopped reading it once I realized what it was. It’s clear that it was meant for your eyes only.”

Carefully, Dex unfolded the two sheets of paper. The small, neat capitals of Whiskey’s handwriting filled the pages, and it took him no more than the first line of the second paragraph to see the words for what they were.
Wil.

It’s silly. When I sat down at my desk tonight and opened my laptop, I had the full intention of writing my final assignment for my intro to fiction class. I was three lines into the tale of “The Capuchin and the Caju” when my brain decided that no morals and animal stories were not in the cards.

Silly in that way that realizing feelings about something, or in this case someone, often is. It’s sudden and sometimes violent like a falling anvil in a Looney Tunes cartoon. It hits you and pounds you flat into the pavement. Foda-se! I mean, I don’t even know how I missed it, this thumping in my chest when you’re around, but I did.

It’s there buzzing around my lungs like a swarm of bees with every breath. I feel it in the rutter of my heart when you turn your whole attention on me, no matter what you were doing before, to speak. Your hands look like a Samba when you talk to me. They rut, and turn, and triple step and you know what? Even when they make a mistake, saying “Late” when they mean “Not yet”, they are mesmerizing, because you, out of everyone on campus, took the time to speak to me as if I were an equal. To you, I wasn’t a child, enfeebled, or a job (the way I am to my interpreters). You stepped in when I was floundering and about to panic. You asked me questions not because you saw me as an exotic thing, but as a source of experience and information so that you may better interact with your sister by learning what you could from me, by letting me teach you.

Silly how you sat there on your bed in that motel room we shared on the road to State College staring at me when you didn’t know, when you didn’t know how my brain would jar me awake with the past. You didn’t laugh and say “What the fuck is a weighted blanket?” and you need medication. Are you some kind of headcase? You simply asked if I needed it for a life threatening condition and offered to find a 24-hour pharmacy if I had said that it was. Though it wasn’t what I was used to, you offered to share my bed so that I could sleep.
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Silly in that way that I huddled there in that haunted house scrambling for some semblance of normalcy when all the lights around me flashed in nauseating spurts that had me reeling and frozen in place. When strobe lights sent me back to the worst time in my life, you were there with a helping hand, guiding me to safety. There was no judgement, no condescension, only the steady hand of a trusted friend. You sat with my, took the chirping, for me.

It's silly, because I knew then, and here we are now, about to leave on winter break, and I can't say a damn thing, spoken, signed, or otherwise. It's silly, because
I wish I were braver. I used to be, but not anymore. But when I'm around you, I feel a little less scared. If you could spend a minute in my head to understand just how afraid I am on a regular basis, then you'd see how much of a difference 'a little' can make. That's just it though. That little bit has been adding up, and I feel so much different, like the monkey on my back is losing weight, since I've known you. I know what that feeling is, what it means, and I would be silly to deny it further.

I am, by nature, a writer, and so, I've put my words and feelings to paper. I can say it here and maybe it won't sound as 'silly' as it does when I try to speak it aloud.

But God, Will, Guilhermino, I'm head over heels for you. I don't expect you to feel the same, and if you don't, that's okay. I don't want you to feel like you have to return my feelings. That's not why I wrote this. My vovó says you should never bottle up an emotion as intense as love. And well, I take all her advice to heart. So... I love you.

Plain and simple as that
Rafa

By the end of the letter, Dex could hardly breathe. His feelings were mutual, and everything in him at that moment told him to dig out his phone and just call him, say 'Yes, Whiskey, I love you too,' but his dad reached out to cover his hand when he unlocked his phone.

"I might not look like it, but I'm great at romance, William. Ask your mother about it sometime. Listen," he pulled something else from his coat, "you don't want to be at home." Dex opened his mouth to protest, but his dad stopped him. "I know you don't; your mother can see you don't. So here." He gave Dex another sheet of paper. "I'll drive you to the Amtrak station tomorrow morning. In Boston, you need to take an Orange Line train five stops from North Station to Back Bay Station. You'll get into Penn Station around two in the afternoon. I put enough money in your bank account for you to buy a meal on the train and pay Metro fares. I wrote down everything. You'll take an E train towards Jamaica Center and exit at Lexington and 53rd. Take a 6 Express to Pelham Bay Park Station. You have enough money for a taxi from the station to Rafa's build—"

"How do you—"

"Your mom and I had a nice conversation with his grandmother during the Parents' Weekend game. I remembered the name of their Co-operative. It's up to you from there."

Dex stared, shell-shocked, at the itinerary in his hands. "Dad, I don't know what…"

His dad lay a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. Your mom and I understand." At the sight of Dex's worried face, his dad backtracked. "No, not like that. I didn't out you or anything. Please don't think I would ever do that, because I never would. I just told her that you were in love and found out your feelings were reciprocated. I didn't go into detail, and I was vague with gender. I phrased my response carefully, but William... your mom is- she's not like her brothers. You can tell her if that's what you want. She'll accept you just as you are. She'll still love you; I know she will. Okay?"

Dex chewed on his bottom lip and nodded. "Okay, yeah. Do you think, um, she might want to come with us tomorrow morning?"

"I'll talk to her. And look, if she was paying attention at Parents' Weekend, once you tell her, she'll realize that she saw what I saw in you. The way you acted around him, the way he made you smile...trust me. She will understand."

Chapter End Notes

Portuguese Translations and stuff mentioned from this chapter:

linguinha and chouriço are both types of sausage
feijjada- is a popular dish recipe here if you're interested
maracujá- passionfruit
Bis are a type of candy bar popular in Brazil see them here
Filho de puta- Son of a bitch! or Motherfucker!
vovó- grandpa
Para Rafinha, no seu 18º aniversário- For Rafinha, on your 18th birthday
Feliz aniversário com amor- Happy Birthday with Love
Desculpe-me, vovó. Eu tentei, mas foi um dia ruim- I'm sorry, grandma. I tried, but it was a bad day
Eu encontrei estes e... I found these and...
Sim, eu sei- yes I know
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Track Listing:
Scenes 1-3: “Better Love” - Hozier
Scene 4: “Every Other Freckle” - Alt-J
Scene 5: “Sim ou Não” - Anitta feat. Maluma
Scenes 6 & 7: “All I Want” - Echos

Contains one NSFW art in scene 7. Also rating has increased and tags have been updated to show grey-romantic character even though Whiskey has not self-identified as such.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

With a yawn, Dex stared out the car window at early morning Portland. When his dad had said ‘in the morning,’ he naturally assumed after sunrise. Not five in the damn morning. Thankfully, his mom had been waiting in the kitchen when he shuffled downstairs, a large, steaming, travel mug of coffee ready. She’d simply pressed it into his outstretched hand. He’d been surprised to find his duffel packed and ready for him. Before he could open his mouth to ask who had done that for him, she’d given him a warm smile.

Something about the way she looked in that moment told him his father was absolutely right. He could tell her, and everything would be okay.

As he took a sip of his coffee, made exactly the way he liked it, he took a deep breath. There had been no hint of nervousness when he’d come out to his dad. They’d been close all his life, always a strong sense of trust between them, that Dex never doubted for even a second that his father wouldn’t accept him. Not one. Though he knew he could trust him, and his staunch belief that his mother would understand, a hint of ‘what if’ remained.

Be brave.

“Hey, Mama?”

She took a moment before replying with a, “Hmm? What is it?”

You can do this. “I need to tell you something, something important. Really important.”

Rather than turn around in the passenger seat like he expected her to, she unbuckled.

“Wait. What are you-”

She squeezed herself through the gap in the front seats and then plopped down next to him.

“We’re in a moving car. You did not need to do that.”

She waved him off. “Nonsense, fidelino. You said it was important. So, here I am.”

He played with the lid of his mug. “So um, I’m going to New York, because I’m in love.”

“I’m aware,” she said with a smile, laying her hands over his own.

“No, but you don’t know the whole reason. Yes, I’m in love, but… not with… You see; it’s like this.” He sighed. “I’m… gay. And I’m going to New York for Rafa.”

There was a tense moment of silence that filled the cab of the car before his mother sucked in an audible breath. “Oh my God. I’m a terrible mother.”

His face fell and nausea filled his stomach.

She was quick to put him at ease. “Oh, no! Not because of you, bicciuridu. No. Not at all. You are perfect the way you are, the way God made you. I meant because I didn’t shut them up when it didn’t concern me, and I’d be a terrible parent if I let them hurt you even if they aren’t aware.”

“But, Mama. You have two other children still living at home. You have to think of them first. I’m a big boy. I’ll deal. I’ll keep working my ass off in school and in hockey and maybe I get lucky. I get a damn good job that makes enough money to get you all out of there. Get Dad a job he likes, one he’s not miserable at.”

“Could ask—”

His dad’s voice interrupted her. “Don’t even suggest it, Martina. You love your job; you’re
amazing at it. One of us should love what we do, okay? I will gladly put up with Frankie and his bullshit so you can stay happy in your work."

“But it’s just nails. There are so many other better paying jobs than a nail technician. It’s selfish, Jimmy.”

“No, it isn’t. I want you to be happy, Marti. It’s important to me.”

She sighed. “Okay. I won’t say anything, William. I’m very happy you trusted me,” she said as they pulled to a stop in front of the Amtrak station.

No sooner had he exited the car than he found himself crushed in a hug from both his parents.

“Go get ‘im, Tiger.”

“Thanks, Mama. Glad you’re on my side.”

“Always.”

***

Rafa adjusted in his seat, his hand curling in Bueno’s orange fur as Dr. Martinez’s therapy cat curled up against his thigh, no doubt purring loudly because he could sure as hell feel it. Bueno yawned and stretched out on the sofa, drawing a smile out of him.

Dr. Martinez tapped him on the leg to regain his attention.

You still doing okay, Rafa?

She signed. One of the reasons Vovó D had sought her out in the first place was her fluency in ASL.

He nodded.

I know you feel guilty about your reaction to finding that letter, but I want you to understand that feeling is not only common, but natural.

He scoffed and curled his hands into fists and relaxed them a few times. Natural to blame my mom for being abused? No, Val. That’s not right.

Rafa, I didn’t say your feelings were correct. I said they were natural. It is normal to have misplaced blame after trauma. Power and control were taken away, and blame is your brain’s way of trying to get that back. You were a child. Children rely on and look to their parents to keep them safe. Being angry with your mother for not protecting you from your dad is normal. Even though the rational part of your brain understands it was not her fault, that she was a victim too, at your basest level your brain sees the abuse as a failure on both your parents’ parts. Your dad for hurting you, and your mom for not keeping you safe. Yes, you are right. What he did, was not her fault. She suffered just as much as you, more so from what you’ve told me over the years, from how often she took the abuse so your dad wouldn’t go after you. But, you’re still angry. Dr. Martinez stopped signing for a minute to let her words sink in.

But why? The letter was happy and hopeful. I don’t understand why I had that bad of a reaction to finding it. Bueno climbed into his lap, rubbing his head under Rafa’s chin.

Feelings of grief, Rafa, don’t abide by the rules of logic. Being angry at the person for being gone, is also normal. I know we’ve talked about that before. When’s the last time you visited your mother?

It’s been a while. I don’t remember.

Dr. Martinez’ brows drew together in concern Why is that?

He shrugged. I dunno.

Rafa, you and I promised not to lie to each other. Remember?

Yeah. Sorry. I just… it hurts. You know? I was always such a wreck, and it was just depressing. I don’t know the whole reason. That was only a half truth, Val. Not a whole lie.

She nodded, making some notations in his file. Here’s what I want you to do for me today on your way home. Stop and visit your mother’s grave. Talk to her. Tell her about college and how you’re doing. Even I can see the positive impact school has had on you. I think you’ll feel a lot less guilty if you do this. Tell her you found the letter. Even if you don’t say it aloud and only sign it. That still counts. Okay?

Yeah. Okay.

She wrapped up the session, and they parted ways. Outside Dr. Martinez’s office, Rafa tightened the laces on his trainers, tugged on his gloves and adjusted his fleece headband back over his ears. Her building was a few miles from his house, and the cemetery was only a mile out of his way. He’d been running to and from therapy for years now. It was an easy route, even in winter.

He jogged in place a few times to get his heart rate up and began the steady pace to his destination. Never one to pound the pavement as he ran, the vibration of his feet striking the
ground too jarring for him to handle, he was light on his feet. Vovó D said he floated, not like a butterfly, but like a feather.

His tactile bracelet tightened around his wrist, causing him to stop his run at the corner. As he waited for the approaching emergency vehicle, wherever it was coming from, to arrive, he let the cool air fill his lungs. A speeding ambulance rushed past him moments later, sending a spray of dirty snow his way. Only quick thinking saved him from wet clothes.

When he turned down a side street, the crest of the hill that housed the cemetery’s mausoleum appeared in his field of vision. *Here goes nothing.*

***

Dex shifted his hold on the shopping bag and bouquet of flowers as he made his way from the subway station to Whiskey’s building. It had been a long day, a long and emotional day for that matter. He wasn’t sure what he’d expected when he’d come out to his mother on the early morning ride to the Amtrak station, but her climbing into the back seat of his uncle’s car while the car was still in motion so she could hug him was not it.

An idea had taken hold in his mind somewhere around Lawrence, Massachusetts and refused to leave his brain. So, he’d spent the next couple hours calling every damn florist in New York City he could find until he found one—the only one who not only sold, but had the flowers he was looking for available. Unfortunately that meant a slight detour from Penn Station before traveling to the Bronx, and by slight he meant all the way down near Battery Park. The extra travel time was worth it though to get what he wanted.

The lovely older woman working at Capricorn’s Tropicals had been more than happy to create a small bouquet that would fit in his budget when he explained what he needed them for. And, since cut flowers had the tendency to you know… wilt and dry up, he also bought a potted succulent.

So here he was, arriving two hours later than he should be, and his stomach had all but tied itself in knots. The apartment directory was a lot longer than he was expecting. From ground level, Pelham Pointe Co-ops didn’t look as big as it clearly was. Dex stepped out from under the awning and craned his head skyward. He could only count twelve stories and yet- twenty. Whatever.

Luckily enough, theirs was the only residence listed with Ribeiro Viscaino. Wouldn’t that have been awkward? ‘Hello, I’m looking for Rafa. Oh, he doesn’t live there. Crap.’ Yep, that would have been in a word, mortifying.

He pressed the buzzer and waited. And waited. And waited. In his haste to get here and surprise Whiskey, Dex had neglected to form a plan for what to do on the off-chance that they wouldn’t be home. What if they had gone out of town to visit relatives? He certainly didn’t have enough money to stay anywhere in New York for more than one night. Though, he probably had enough for a train ticket to Samwell if it came to that. He hoped it didn’t.

Dex sat down on the stairs to think. Yet, not even five minutes later, he was snapped out of his thoughts by a surprised, “Will?”

Startled, he looked up to see Whiskey standing there, brows drawn together in confusion, lips slightly parted. “Raf-” His mouth went dry at the sight of him in criminally tight running clothes, compression top and leggings that hugged every line, every muscle.

Oh my God.

Yeah, he was pretty sure he let out an audible whimper

“What are you doing here?”

“Um….surprise?”

A rose flush bloomed to the surface of Whiskey’s cheeks. “Oh.”

Dex shook himself out of his gutter-brained thoughts and pulled the bouquet from his shopping sack. He stood, holding them out to him.

“You bought me flowers?” Whiskey inhaled the flowers’ scent. “And you got my favorite? How’d you know that-”

*You told me you liked plumeria, and if I wanted to impress you, I should buy you flowers.*

He blinked at Dex a few times. “I did say that, didn’t I?”

Dex nodded. *Yeah.*

**You remembered.**

*Yeah. Oh, I bought you a plant too. He handed Whiskey the bag with the potted plant in it. It’s a succulent. They’re easy to take care of, but I thought you might like it. You know, since flowers die.*

**Thanks.**

I… found your letter.
“And?” Whiskey asked, his voice small, a lot higher in pitch than usual, as though he was scared he was about to be rejected.

Well now, Dex couldn’t have that. He couldn’t have that at all. It took less than a second for his mind to make a decision, and he closed the distance between them. Dex cupped his face, before crashing their lips together. Initially, Whiskey froze, clearly in shock, but only a moment later, that surprise melted away and his whole body relaxed against Dex’s body. Dex cupped his face, before crashing their lips together. Initially, Whiskey froze, clearly in shock, but only a moment later, that surprise melted away and his whole body relaxed against Dex’s body. Dex felt drunk on him. Never in his life did he ever think he would be brave enough to kiss a boy he loved in the middle of a city sidewalk, but here he was, and it was amazing. Even with the winter chill nipping at his exposed skin, he still felt as though he were on fire.

But then… Dex only had a moment to step away before, “Achoo.”

The way Whiskey pulled back and his hand covered the tiny smile playing on his lips was the most adorable thing he’d ever seen. “I’m sorry. I just came from an appointment. My therapist has a cat in her office. You’re allergic, aren’t you? What do you say we head up? I’ll throw these clothes in the wash and shower quick. You’re probably hungry, anyway.” He reached down and grabbed Dex’s hand. “Is this…is this okay?”

Rather than say a word, Dex nodded, earning one of Whiskey’s rare, full-dimpled smiles. It was enough to make Dex weak in the knees.

Upstairs, Whiskey took his duffel and set it out of the way. “Help yourself to anything in the fridge. I’ll be quick.”

As the sound of the shower starting filled the silence, Dex took the opportunity to change into something more comfortable before he wandered around the empty apartment. Given by the building’s rather nice interior, he had to admit, despite Whiskey’s statement to the contrary, he was expecting some posh luxury condo. Instead, it was homey, quaint. Smaller than he’d anticipated, only two bedrooms, one bathroom. On the walls hung dozens of framed photos, even some of what he assumed were Whiskey’s artwork. He stopped to admire the pictures.

A young Whiskey stood in a line of other kids, all wearing pristine, white robes, each receiving a grey and black sash. Whiskey, Dex could see, looked to be at least a good three years older than most of the kids in the group. Older and much taller. Several other photos of a similar nature followed until Whiskey smiled for the camera with a orange and white belt. No photos came earlier than the one where he received a grey belt, and none later than the orange. For all the two of them talked, Whiskey had never mentioned taking karate.

Dex progressed down Whiskey’s memory lane, surveying every photo he could. These were glimpses into him, that Dex had not seen, and they were fascinating.

In one of the earliest pictures, a toddler-aged Whiskey sat on a woman’s lap, wearing a birthday hat. Both of them shared matching eyes and similar features. This was probably his mother, and Dex felt sad on his behalf that Whiskey hadn’t been able to grow up with her.

“What in the-” The sight of Whiskey’s bedroom door confused him.

“We didn’t want get a light up doorbell for my bedroom. Seemed silly. So,” he tapped the red circle, while Dex stood there clutching his chest in fright, “this is like a traffic light. Green means come in, yellow come in slowly, red means stay out.” He detached the happy face icon from where it hung. “These icons come off, obviously.” He pressed it to the empty piece of velcro on the door, underneath the green circle. “If I want to be alone but I’m having a bad day, I move the sad smiley. That way Vovó D will leave me alone, but I have to text her every hour or so to let her know I’m okay. If I don’t, she’s gonna ignore the red light.”

And the happy face? Why would you put that under the red light?"

Whiskey blushed. “Um…if I am otherwise…ahem….busy.” He mimed masturbating. “She walked in on me one time! And trust me, we’d both like it if that never happened again. Sort of a ‘please for the love of God, do not come in here.’ If I’m having a bad day but need to talk about it, I put the sad face under the green light. The yellow is just so she doesn’t startle me if I have my back to the door. It’s a good system.”

Dex stared at him, brain temporarily offline. After a few moments of inaction, Whiskey passed a hand in front of his eyes.

Hello. Earth to Will. Anyone home?

Dex blinked, I’m sorry. I’m just-

A smirk played at the corner of Whiskey’s lips. Hung up on the thought of my dick?

He rubbed the back of his neck. Something like th-

Whiskey’s mouth on his cut him off, and Dex found himself backed into the wall. His knees went weak when he began to kiss down his neck. And oh dear God, Dex thought as Whiskey popped the first couple of buttons on his shirt, moving it out of the way so he leave hot open-mouthed kisses on his collarbone. Inside his chest, his heart felt like it was going to explode it was beating so fast and hard.

“You, um...you’re really good at that,” he said, knowing full well that Whiskey would have no
idea what he’d just said, but Dex imagined that he’d be able to feel his words reverberate in his chest.

“I’m sorry. What was that? ‘m I doing something you like?”

Dex nodded furiously.

“Good,” Whiskey mumbled against his skin.

Dex couldn’t think of a single response, and so, he kissed him senseless instead. After some time though, he needed air and broke the kiss. He was a panting mess; they both were. And because he just couldn’t let himself have too much of a good thing, Dex, like the disaster he was, opened his big mouth, er well...hands. Yep, utter and total, category five, human disaster. I had no idea you did karate.

Whiskey laughed as he shook his head. I didn’t. That’s jiu-jitsu. Vovó D thought it would be good for me. I... He worried his bottom lip between his teeth before clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. “I got bullied in school when I went back to mainstream schooling. A lot. Took three months of that for her to suggest it.”

Is orange the highest you can get?

No.

Why’d you stop?”

Whiskey’s whole expression soured for a brief moment before closing off entirely. “Got sick...sort of. Look, it’s a real bummer of a story. Some other time?”

“Ok,” Dex said, nodding in earnest.

“Thanks.” Whiskey looked him, a bit apprehensive, but with an undercurrent of excitement to his features. “Hey, you want to go somewhere fun tonight?”

“Are you talking about a date?” Dex asked when he’d caught his breath enough to enunciate clearly.

“Yeah, I would like to take you on a date. A family friend owns a dance club. Don’t look at me like that. It’s not a nightclub the way you’re thinking. It’s not like got a VIP velvet rope or anything. Just a safe place to dance.”

I’d like that.

Whiskey cupped the back of his head and pulled him in for a tender kiss, and he let himself savor the feeling, sinking against him. Given his reluctance to show his bare chest around the team, it was easy to forget sometimes, just how solid Whiskey was. Those broad shoulders and those hands… Fuck! Those large, captivating hands. For a moment, Dex’s imagined how those hands would look wielding a hammer or power tools as he taught him how to build things.

Irresistible probably, but the sight would be nothing like how they looked as they drew with graphite smudged on his skin, stray bits of marker and Micron ink here and there, making deft strokes on paper. How would they look on Dex’s skin? The thought was almost too much, and he snapped himself out of his thoughts only to find Whiskey had led them into his bedroom.

He broke the kiss and looked around. Dark teal walls, bookcase, drafting table beside the bed. A signed Lundqvist jersey hanging in a display case hung above it. Upon the hardwood floors lie a plush area rug. But that was as far as he got in surveying his surroundings before Whiskey pulled him back in for another kiss one that turned frantic and filthy quick, damn quick.

Yeah he could get used to this.

***

Sprawled on his stomach on Rafa’s bed, wearing only a pair of basketball shorts. Will turned his head towards him and gave a sleepy grin, lips kiss swollen and red. Rafa felt his heart stutter. Dear God, it should be illegal to look like that.

Will mumbled something half into the pillow.

Rafa glanced down at his phone. Bless the creator of speech to text technology. Honestly, give them an award and keys to the whole fucking kingdom.

Do you mind? Trying to sleep here.

“i can see that.”

Oh can you?

“Mmmh,” he said as he straddled Will’s waist, leaning forward to rub his shoulders and trace along a fresh purple mark on the side of his neck. “I didn’t realize a little making out and you’d be down for the count.

That was more than a little making out. I lost my shirt somewhere and you’re down your tank top
“Shame I didn’t lose your shorts for you too.”

Oh fuck you, Whisk.

“Not the other way around? That’s a shame. Cute booty like yours?”

Beneath him, Will coughed, most likely choking on nothing.

“Relax, I’m joking… well sort of. Least let me buy you dinner first.”

You’re impossible, Rafael.

He grinned at him. “Using my given name now? You really know how to win a boy’s heart, Will.”

I had no idea you were such a tease.

“Really? I thought my flirting was pretty obvious. But I mean, if pitching is more your thing, I’m up for that, too.” Rafa walked his fingers over Will’s freckles. “But, you’re making it so easy looking like that.”

Looking like what?

He kissed the bare skin between Will’s shoulder blades. “Oh you know exactly how you look.”

He blanketed him with his body, trying to keep as much of his weight off him as possible, but judging by the ‘Oomph’ Will let out, forceful enough for Rafa to feel, he was not successful.

“Sorry. I forget I’m a bit heavier than you.”

Will grumbled into the pillow.

“What was that?” he asked sliding his phone closer to Will’s mouth. Will stuck his tongue out at him but obliged nonetheless.

I said. I don’t understand how you weigh so much. You’re shorter than me.

“Mm. Shorter, but bulkier. And anyway, shut up; you love it.”

When Rafa started to sit back up, Will reached out and caught his arm.

No. Don’t get up. It’s nice

He kissed the back of Will’s neck. “Okay,” Rafa mumbled against his skin.

But you’re right. I do love it. You are pretty fucking hot all around so…

Rafa felt a flush creep up the back of his neck. “Yeah, I know.”

Do you now, Mr. Cocky?

He rolled his eyes at the text. “Will, I own a mirror. I know what I look like.” He hoped his voice conveyed the fond annoyance he meant it to.

Must be nice.

Rafa felt a twinge of sadness at Will’s low self-esteem. “Can I be honest with you?” he asked, sitting up and lazily tracing a flower pattern out of a section of freckles.

You know you can. Always.

“ I think you’re beautiful, Will.”

Underneath him, Will turned over to face him, sending Rafa slightly off balance. Will caught him before he completely rolled off him. “Boys aren’t supposed to be beautiful, Whiskey.”

He brought Will’s hand to his lips. “Do me a favor. When we’re together like this…use my name?” Will nodded. “And who told you boys can’t be beautiful? They’re wrong.”

“Well yeah, maybe like Nursey, Bitty, and Ransom. Sure. But me? That’s hil-”

He pressed a finger to Will’s lips, stopping his self-deprecation. “Your skin is just… Fuck. I really like your skin.”


“I love your freckles. They remind me of Ben-Day dots in old comics. Do you know what those are?”

Will intertwined their fingers together. “Are those like the black dots on the art?”

“Not just black. It was part of the printing process. Added depth and illusion of more colors. Your freckles make you look a bit like a comic character. Least I think so.”

“So I look funny?” he asked with a smirk.

Rafa hung his head and sighed. “Don’t do that. You're well aware how important comics are to me, and you know I consider the art in them just as valid as a fine painting. And your skin is so reflective. The way light dances off it. It’s... an artist thing. Sorry, I can’t really describe it. You just notice these things.”
“Sorry.”

A devilish idea came over him, and Rafa leaned over to grab a ballpoint pen from his desk.

“What are you-”

“Shh. Stay still,” he smirked and, with a steady, practiced hand, began drawing lines between various freckles on Will’s chest, pausing a moment to pick up his pen when Will began to squirm.

“What?”

“That tickles.”

“Uh-ho. You mean right here?” He poked him in between the fifth and sixth ribs near his armpit.

Will writhed, laughing and trying to push his hand away. “Yes. There.”

Rafa leaned down and kissed his nose. “Sorry. I’ll be careful.”

And so he continued, immersing himself in his drawing. He was just about finished when Will tapped him on the arm. He looked up. “What?”

“Are you... connecting the dots?”

Rafa nodded at him. “I’m just about…” He made the last few strokes. “And there. Done. Wanna see?” He helped him to sit up and led him over to the full length mirror hanging on the closet door. “Well?” he asked, slightly nervous about Will’s reaction. He duplicated the sign and pressed it into Will’s skin, covering the drawing. It was one thing to say it in a letter, but this was saying it aloud. Well, sort of. No. It was saying it aloud. Just silent- Fuck it.

He spared a glance up at Will’s face and found him smiling... and blushing. Rather than speak, he mimicked Rafa’s action, holding the same universal sign for love up against his chest, above his heart. Rafa bit his bottom lip as he chuckled, feeling a bit shy. When Will pulled him into a hug, he buried his face in Will’s shoulder, breathing him in. “I’m so happy you’re here, Guilhermino.”

Will tapped him, and he looked up. “That’s my name in Portuguese?”

“No. That would be Guilherme. It’s got a diminutive on it. Like how Vovó D calls me, Rafinha?”

“Oh.” Will rubbed the back of his neck.

I’ve been working on... Well, no. Hannah started it. She gave you a namesign. Is that... okay? I know it’s something one usually picks for themselves

Of course. Show me?

Rafa smiled, covering his mouth when Will made the sign for wrestling and then turtle. Hannah’s namesign for him was essentially a Ninja Turtle. “That’s cute.”

But...I sort of well...

If you’re asking if you can give me a namesign, he cupped Will’s cheek. “I’d love that.”

He watched as Will first signed small and then turtle. I worked on it on the train ride. I hope I translated it correctly. Then he began to fingerspell it out. T-A-R-T-A-R-U-G-I-N-H-O. Is that right?

“Close. Right word, wrong diminutive. It would be tartaruginha not -ginho, even tho I’m male. The word for turtle is a feminine word, so... gotta love gendered language, huh?”

Will averted his eyes and shrugged. “Oh.”

“But it’s nice. I like it. Come on. Let’s get dressed. I’m starving.”

***

Dex fiddled with the cuffs of the shirt he’d borrowed from Whiskey. Those shoulders of his that Dex thirsted over all the damn time meant that well... The shirt was too big, the sleeves too long, and he thought he looked ridiculous.

Whiskey, however, had smirked, raising an eyebrow at the sight of Dex in his clothes, offering an “E aí gatinho,” which he neglected to translate for him. Dex wished he could say his response was equally as suave, but nope. He’d blushed and stumbled over his own feet.

Real smooth, Poindexter. Real smooth.

Still, Whiskey hadn’t been lying when he said this place was nothing fancy. Well, at least from the outside it wasn’t, merely a plain brick exterior with a neon sign reading: Oxente. When he’d asked him what that meant, Whiskey had laughed and said it didn’t really translate, but was like saying ‘That’s strange!’ but having it be sort of a good thing... kind of.

Around twenty people stood ahead of them in line waiting to get in, and Dex was nervous. His discomfort with parties extended to crowded bars and clubs as well, no matter what company he found himself with. Just too many people touching him, bumping into him, too many competing smells. The fact that this was his honest to God, first actual date ever, didn’t make the idea of a
crowd any less stressful. In fact, it made his nerves worse.

“Oh, I forgot to give you these,” Whiskey said, handing him a pair of earplugs, “I like to dance, but to do that and have the best time, I like to stand by the DJ speakers.” Whiskey patted him on the chest, and Dex blinked at him in surprise. “I care about your hearing, Guilhermino.” He kissed him on the forehead.

Standing tall and unaffected in line was something Dex wished he could say he did when Whiskey snaked an arm around his waist and nuzzled into his neck while they waited. No dice. Instead, he found himself taking furtive glances about the line and surrounding areas, afraid of who might be watching them.

“Relax,” Whiskey mumbled into his neck, “this is a safe space. Tio Gil is a big supporter of the Queer community always has been.”

Dex tapped him on the shoulder.

T-O Z-e-a-l?

No. T-i-o G-i-l. Family friend I mentioned. He’s not really my uncle, but he's known me all my life. He was my vovô, Thiago’s best friend since childhood. Pretty sure if anything had happened to Vovô D after my mom died, I would have lived with him and Tia Bruna.

Oh. But safe space? I don’t think I…

Whiskey patted him on the cheek before trying to settle his nerves.

There’s a reason the entrance is in the alley, Will. So people in line can’t be seen from the street. He pointed to a sign hanging in the small window next to the door. See? Safe space.

Dex would recognize that inverted, rainbow anywhere. Okay.

The inside of Oxente reminded him of one of the Italian restaurants near home. It was homey, nice. The soft lighting at the bar was offset by the alternating lights of varying colors by the DJ table. Patrons of anywhere from teens to those in their sixties danced out on the black tiled floor. High top tables with small luminaries that cast simulated stars upon the ceiling dotted the room.

But more importantly, couples of all kinds were here. Hetero couples, female couples, male couples, mixed races, nonbinary couples, he even saw what he thought might be a triad dancing together. With no gay clubs near campus, and the fear of being seen by someone who knew his family in Portland, he’d never been in a place like this. It was an eye-opener and damn liberating.

He felt himself relax for the first time since they’d left Whiskey’s building. With a strong arm securely around Dex’s waist, Whiskey had led him through the club. When Dex glanced over at him, he found him standing as tall as he’d ever seen him, a smug grin on his face. It was as though Whiskey was proud to be seen with him, and that, in and of itself, was a new experience for Dex.

His father used to tell him (to prepare him, Dex corrected himself), for all the negative stereotypes he would surely face as a male redhead. The world would see him as weak, unattractive, clumsy, a joke. It was bad enough to be ginger in the first place. It was worse knowing that of all five Poindexter children, he was not only the sole redhead (Hannah’s strawberry-blonde hair, closer to blonde than red) but also the only one with freckles and ivory skin. All of his siblings favored his mother. It was no wonder why he and his dad got along so well. ‘We gingers must stick together, William.’

It was silly, Dex thought, that he should get so down on himself about his looks. He knew others had it far worse. Once, Nursey had gone on a tirade about racism and white privilege, and Dex, though he wanted to chime in with input, had sat quiet. Nursey was partially right. White privilege only went so far, and even then there were nuances to it. What type of whiteness one possessed absolutely mattered.

But now? Well, damn if Whiskey didn’t look positively smitten with the idea of showing him off as he maneuvered them to the bar.

Whiskey’s deep voice snapped him out of his thoughts. “Oi, Quico. Tudo bem?”

“Rafa, quanto tempo?”

“Meu tio aqui?”

“Não que eu tenha visto,” the bartender replied with a bright smile. “Quem é?”

“Meu namorado, Gui.”

The bartender extended his hand towards Dex. “Nice to meet you. Will, is it?”

Speechless, Dex only nodded. He was vaguely aware of Whiskey speaking to him, until he noticed a flurry of hands beside him. He looked over to see a smirk playing on the corner of Whiskey’s lips. What?

You just look a little, well like you short circuited. What gives?

You um… Portuguese… sound hot. Really.

Whiskey rolled his eyes, but his face still remained playful. Wow! That was eloquent, Will.

Dex bumped into his shoulder, and tried not to blush when Whiskey promised to speak Portuguese to him more often if it really turned him on.
As they settled into an empty space near the DJ table, Whiskey pointed to his ears. Oh yes, the earplugs. Even with them in, he could still hear the music, but he was more than grateful for the decibel reduction. This close to the speakers, he could feel the floor vibrate. And was it just him or did the lights seem timed to the music?

_The lights are they synced?_ He asked Whiskey when he watched the huge vertical rows of LED’s that filled the back wall behind the MC pulse and flash with the beat. They looked like a music equalizer program.

_Yeah. It was a little something Tio Gil added for me to augment the regular light show._

_He did it for you?_

Whiskey gave a little nod and matching smile. _Yeah. Remember how I said I loved the spectacle of live music? Well, Oxente has youth nights where it's only ages under eighteen allowed in here and their parents. And I’ve been coming to them, God, since I was eleven I think. There was always something missing for me. So a few years ago, he commissioned an engineer to help him with this._

_That couldn’t have been cheap._

_It wasn’t, but… I already loved coming here, but now it’s one of my favorite places in the world._

_It's cool. I like it._

_Give me a sec?_

Dex watched him move around a group of dancers and make his way to the DJ. Whiskey pulled out his phone, index finger swiping along the screen. Then, he showed it to the DJ who took a look and nodded. In no time, Whiskey was back in front of him, moving to the music. Unlike that night at the kegster, he moved completely with the beat. No wonder he wanted to be near the speakers. Whiskey had positioned them so that he could see the lights along the back wall perfectly.

It was impossible not to notice the carefree expression on Whiskey’s face and the confidence in his movements, confidence that Dex wished he shared. He couldn’t dance, well not unless bouncing around in a mosh pit with Henry counted as dancing, which he was fairly certain Whiskey would say no, it didn’t.

When he stepped on Whiskey’s foot for the second time in as many minutes, Whiskey shook his head with a fond smile.

_I'm sorry. I can’t dance. And I've never really been to a club like this. Henry took me to concerts and we moshed, but that was about it._

Whiskey reached out and pulled him close, turning him around so Dex’s back was against his chest, barely touching. Oh God. Was the guy trying kill him?

After a minute more of what could only be described as ‘Awkward White Boy Dancing’, Whiskey’s large hand splayed against Dex’s stomach pulling him flush against his body. Then, in a way that sent chills racing down his spine—pleasant chills, thoroughly pleasant—Whiskey spoke right next to his ear. “Put your back into it, Guilhermino. I won’t bite...not hard.” He nipped at Dex’s earlobe, and moved both hands to his hips, moving him in time to the music.

Yes. He was trying to kill him, in the best way possible.

Dex let his head loll back onto Whiskey’s shoulder and just let him lead the dance, trying to feel the music the way he did. He understood now, why Whiskey was quite insistent that he wear his pair of Converse out tonight. The thin soles did little to dull the pulse of the floor. Against the side his neck, Whiskey left hot, open-mouthed kisses.

Chest heaving, Dex tried to keep his knees from buckling. Whiskey, it seemed, noticed, and only held him tighter. He was sure that he whimpered, not that anyone, Whiskey or otherwise would hear it. All he knew was that he was glad he wasn’t dancing behind Whiskey or he’d probably come in his damn pa-

Oh heaven help him! Apparently Whiskey could twerk and absolutely had to give him a demonstration right up against his dick. There was only one way this could end, and Dex shuddered at the thought of his come-sticky boxers off his junk later. Yet, when Dex could take just about all he could of that fantastic ass grinding against him, Whiskey turned around and, wrapping both arms around his waist, tugged him in close so there was nary an inch of space between them. So close, in fact, that it was impossible to ignore that Whiskey’s dick was just as hard as his own.

With a smirk and a flash of his eyebrows, Whiskey removed a hand from Dex’s waist to shake a finger at him. ‘Not yet,’ he mouthed, and then leaned forward to capture his lips in a kiss that was absolutely filthy. Gasping for air, after what felt like ages, Dex pulled back.

_You’re gonna be the death of me._

He shrugged. _Well, I mean, L-A P-E-T-I-T-E M-O-R-T is the French phrase for orgasm. Basically means, the little death. So..._ Upon seeing Dex’s blank expression—which was really his brain just trying to come back on, but Whiskey clearly misinterpreted it—he backtracked. _Sorry,_
am I coming on too strong? I… don’t know how to do… He gestured back and forth between the two of them. This.

What?

With someone I care about. I mean, I’m usually just trying for the pick up. But if I’m too aggressive about this, tell me. I can pull back the P-D-A if it’s not your thing. I just, in the past I’ve usually just about the sex, and I mean, yeah I had a girlfriend in high school. One single girlfriend, but like I wasn’t… I didn’t like her the same way she liked me. That’s what made her dump me eventually. She thought I was too cold. Broke her heart just by being myself. We stopped and scrubbed both hands down his face, taking a moment to collect himself. But I’m not. I swear. And… it’s new and scary, and good. Oh so good, but I don’t want to fuck this up. And it-

Dex reached out and grabbed Whiskey’s hands, stilling them. Rafa, he signed, using Whiskey’s new namesign, it’s okay. I understand. When I said you’re gonna kill- The little death? More like, L-A B-O-N-N-E M-O-R-T. I can change the way I act, you know, all the…

He kissed Whiskey on the forehead. Don’t. It’s okay that you aren’t Mr. Romantic. I fell in love with you just the way you are. You do not need to change. Now, how about you show me some more of your moves?

***

Rafa’s breath left him in a huff as his back hit his bedroom door, effectively closing it. His head spun, like he’d had too much to drink, but he, like Will, hadn’t had a drop. He rubbed his forehead in an attempt to avert his eyes away from watching Will’s fingers work open the buttons on his shirt. Yet, that only made things worse, and by worse, he meant better. So much fucking better.

The moon gleamed in through his bedroom window, and it cast the room in a blue light, giving the space an almost marine-like appearance. Will’s shirt had come off as soon as Rafa had opened the door, and now, as he stood there panting trying anything not look at all the bare skin before him.

It was impossible. The artist in him couldn’t help but look at the way Will’s skin looked opalescent in the moonlight, freckles of various shades standing out against the pale. Would it be too purple of prose to say that, in that moment, Will looked like an ethereal oceanid? That is to say, if sea nymphs could be handsome young men. Somehow, Rafa didn’t think it was too much. In fact, his words were not eloquent enough. So, his mind settled for crass.

Hot damn! Yeah, that about summed up how he felt looking at Will. Hot, fucking damn.

He felt the the moan he uttered rumble in his chest when Will began to kiss down his neck, breath ghosting over the skin, dampening the thin fabric of his undershirt as those kisses traveled south. Then, that feeling of closeness was gone, halted by the hesitating fingers at the hem of his shirt. Rafa looked down to see Will kneeling (and there weren’t enough words in any language he knew to accurately describe Will, on his knees, as he looked up at him from beneath his copper lashes) and holding the bottom of Rafa’s tank top.

His brain froze on him, only for a second, as he realized the significance of Will’s gesture and what he was silently asking. ‘Do you want to leave this on?’ his eyes were asking. And… did he? Leaving his shirt on was a comfort zone for him. He’d managed to somehow never have sex without staying partially dressed. But, as he licked his lips, once more taking in the sight of Will, Rafa knew this was different. So, he tugged the shirt up over his head, feeling too exposed as the garment went flying across the room. He blinked several times, focusing on his breathing.


Warm lips moved against his own, while tentative fingers traced first the long-healed mark along his sternum. He wasn’t sure what made him do it, but Rafa covered Will’s fingers with his own, guiding and pushing them into his skin with just enough pressure for Will to feel the closure system reinforcing the bone. Then he moved Will’s hand to his ribs, pausing over each small plate that had put his chest back together. Before he showed him the last scar, the location of last piece of metal that lie under his skin, a constant reminder of the worst time in his life, Rafa lifted Will’s hand and kissed his fingertips.

The first time someone on the team had, in jest, tried to ruffle his hair, Rafa had jerked away violently as though he’d been burned. The chirping had ranged from calling him a diva to stating it was just hair. But that was just it… it wasn’t just hair. He’d made sure ever since his near-death experience, that his hair covered the left side of his skull, hiding the scar beneath it.

He could feel himself shaking as he traced Will’s fingers along the circular scar on his temporal
bone, and the plate beneath it. Then, suddenly, the hand was gone from his hair, and he felt a brief pang of fear that it was all too much and that Will would bolt. His fear were quickly, allayed, however, when Will cupped his face and kissed him with reckless abandon.

***

Back arched against the soft sheets of Whiskey’s bed, Dex couldn’t take it anymore. He’d already come once (in his own hand, unfortunately), and he wanted him so badly he thought he might explode. He tapped him on the top of his head, groaning at the sight of Whiskey looking up Dex’s body. Seeing his lips wrapped around his cock was almost too much.

I’m good.

Instead of responding, Whiskey merely rose an arched brow at him, mouth still working his cock like there was no tomorrow. Dex figured this was his way of asking, ‘You sure?’.

I promise. I’m good.

When Whiskey had handed him the bottle of lube (in what felt like damn eons ago with all the prep he’d done one Dex) and lay back on the bed, he’d shaken his head, then pointed to his chest.

‘Really? I’m not exactly small. I mean, it’s no monster, but… Look, I was just kidding earlier when I said the other way around,’ Whiskey had said, knowing about Dex’s lack of experience. Well not lack. He wasn’t a virgin, just hadn’t had too many go-rounds. However, this would be a first for him.

‘I want it to be you, Rafa,’ he’d signed in return, which was precisely how Dex had ended up here, being teased out of his mind with only fingers and mouth. He just needed all of him right the fuck now.

Come on. Fuck me already! And that did the trick. Whiskey’s cock twitching in excitement against Dex’s leg. He mentally marked down dirty signing as one of Whiskey’s turn ons, vowing to use it more often, perhaps randomly in conversation.

He watched, entranced as Whiskey rolled a condom on himself. Such a fine cock. What? If straight men could ogle a pair of breasts, he damn well was gonna appreciate the ‘penile perfection’ in front of him. Whiskey leaned down, kissing him as he entered. The moan he made was absolutely filthy, and he wished for just a moment, Whiskey could hear himself, hear how fucking gorgeous he sounded.

His pace was maddeningly slow, and Dex wanted to shout ‘enough already!’ not that it would do any good. Still, he knew Whiskey was being careful not only for Dex’s sake but his own. His heavier weight on top of him was a heavenly presence as Whiskey lie still for a minute, letting Dex adjust. He…hadn’t been lying when he said he was above average. And yeah, if it were anyone else, Dex would probably be hurting. But it wasn’t anyone else. This was Whiskey, and Dex supposed being in love with the guy added a whole other level of endorphins…or maybe he was that well prepped. Whatever the reason, he just wanted him to. Dex tapped him twice on the left shoulder, their sign for ‘Go ahead’.

“Oh my fucking…” Those hips, the same ones that had swiveled and grinded and twerked on him at the club earlier- Well now, they hadn’t moved like this, not at all: Smoothly rolling against his ass as he thrusted.

Whiskey tapped his stomach. That tactile sign was asking, You okay? Dex nodded. He was so much more than okay, and yet, he just needed… more. He pushed, gently, on Whiskey’s chest urging him to sit up.

“What are you…”

Dex silenced him with a kiss as he climbed into his lap, fingers scratching the buzzed hair at his nape. But then, the change in position made Whiskey’s cock brush against his prostate, and Dex panted out, “Oh fuck.” The open mouthed kisses he made on Dex’s collarbone made everything better.
Like a ship bobbing on the waves, Dex rode him, feeling more connected to someone than he ever had before. He imagined it was probably the same for Whiskey, especially knowing how infrequently he felt romantic feelings at all. That only fueled Dex further. He was a first for Whiskey, too. The thought was enough to tip him over the edge, and he buried his head in Whiskey’s neck as he came.

In a perfect world, they would have come together. But the world was not perfect, and Dex was all the more happy for it. Not even giving him a moment to come down, Whiskey tipped him back onto the bed, leaning over him so that he could intertwine their fingers together above Dex’s head. After a dozen or so thrusts more, Whiskey came with, ‘Guilhermino,’ on his lips.

Dex held him tightly as he rode out his orgasm. When he’d stopped shaking, Whiskey planted a tender kiss on the sweat-smudged ink drawing on Dex’s chest before he rolled off him. Still panting, a soft chuckle escaped his lips. “Fuck! That is so much better when you care about the person. Don’t want to inflate your ego—I lied. I totally do—but that was the best sex of my life.”

Dex sat up and turned on the bedside lamp. *Mine too.*

**Yeah?**

*You… you’re really good at this. Prior to this I’d had sex exactly twice, and neither time was I emotionally invested or very good. I mean I lost my virginity to a guy in my frosh writing comp class that I’d talked to twice. What a fucking waste. Should have just held out for another six months; should have been you.*

Whiskey sat up and removed the condom, depositing it into the trash beside the bed. Then, he walked across the hall to the bathroom where Dex heard him wash his hands. He returned with a washcloth for Dex. *Or we could go shower?*

Dex stood and kissed him. *I like the sound of that.*

As the hot water rained down on both of them, Whiskey beckoned for Dex to lean his head down and began to wash his hair for him. *Oh my God, that is the hottest thing… Definitely would be the death of him.*

“You know,” Whiskey said as he his fingers rubbed the shampoo into Dex’s scalp, “if it bothers you, Will, forget about those first two times. If you want to think of me as your first, go ahead. Virginity is just a ridiculous social construct. Besides, you owe no one an explanation about your sex life.”

The possibility of soap in his eyes and mouth did little to deter him from kissing Whiskey in that moment. When he finally pulled back, desperate for air, Dex wiped his eyes and laughed.

**What?**
You have soap bubbles on your… here, let me. He reached out and wiped Whiskey’s brows.
For a minute you looked a bit like Scorcese.

Whiskey smoothed his brows, just to be sure all the later was gone. Given how much money and effort I put into my excellent brow game, and it IS excellent, the thought of Scorcese brows is truly terrifying.

Dex smiled, overwhelmed with affection for him. I love you.

Love you, too.

Chapter End Notes

Translations for American dialect Italian and Portuguese:

fidelino- play on pasta shape fidelini which means little faithful one
bicciuridu- my little boy/my little baby
E aí gatinho- hey cutie (m) E aí gatinha would be for female
Oi, Quico. Tudo bem?- Hey, Quico. How goes? (literally Hey, Quico. All right?)
Quico is nickname for several given names, but in this case it's short for Joaquim.
Rafa, quanto tempo!- Rafa, long time no see!
Meu tio aqui?- My uncle here?
Não que eu tenha visto- Not that I've seen
Quem é?- Who's this?
Meu namorado, Gui.- My boyfriend, Gui (nickname for Guilherme).
Henry watched the water stream out of the faucet in his bathroom sink, mesmerized by the way it swirled around the basin before ultimately funneled down the drain. He dipped his hands into the icy flow and splashed it on his face, a face that felt too hot for all the chill in his veins. When he felt his burning cheeks cool a bit, he straightened, peering at himself in the mirror. His dirty blonde hair hung messy over his forehead, sticking up in several directions at the back of his head. The redness of his cheeks almost obscured the trademark Poindexter freckles that he'd grown to love over the years.

He looked exactly the same as he always had, and yet... inside he was a maelstrom— a swirling mess of confusion, doubt, and barely contained panic. His breaths were shaky as he drew them in and shakier as he pushed them out. He white-knuckled the counter, berating himself for his failure, or to be more accurate, his dick's failure yet again. How could he be a supportive boyfriend through all of this, maintain his stance that he still loved he— him, if he couldn't perform sexually? Sex had been an integral part of their relationship since they lost their virginity to each other back in senior year of high school. He was twenty-three, too young for his body to crap out on him.

A warm arm connected to an even warmer hand slipped around his waist, palm splaying against his chest and thundering heart.

"It's okay, Henry. I'm not the only one who has to examine what he knows about himself on this journey."

"I know, Jessic—" He winced at his faux pas, "Jordan. I'm sorry. I don't mean to say the wrong thing. I'll get it right as soon as I can." He settled back into Jordan's chest, the fabric of his binder scratchy against the skin between Henry's shoulder blades.

"It's okay."

He took a shuddering breath. "I'm trying; I swear I'm trying. I know I said I would support you every step of the way, and I will. I swear to God I will, but what if we get to the end of all of this and I... look at you and all I see is a handsome man I don't want to sleep with? I'll have to let you go so you can be with someone who can give you what you need and deserve. Jordy, I love you with my whole heart, but if that happens, it's gonna crush me."

Jordan kissed the top of his shoulder. "A month ago, I threw you a curveball that has made you rethink your entire sexual orientation. It took me eighteen months with a therapist to realize and come to terms with myself before I came out to you. I would be a hypocrite if I expected you to go from identifying as straight to something else just like that," he said, snapping his fingers. "I'm not gay, Jordan."

"You know, bisexuality is a thing."

"I can't be bi either. I've kissed boys before we got together, and..." Henry waved a hand down his body, gesturing at his crotch, "nothing."

Jordan turned him around so they were face to face. Then, he took Henry's face in his hands. "Babe, you don't have to want men as much as you do women to be bi. You just have to want one man. And look, if, at the end of the line, you aren't sexually attracted to me as a man, but still love and want to stay with me, we will make it work," he said, punctuating every word for emphasis. "It's called being biromantic."

Henry chuckled, "Did you just Bucky Barnes me?"

Jordan's lips twisted in wry amusement, before poking him in the nose. "Aren't we a clever cogs?" He paused, clearly weighing a thought with great care. "Is it the prosthesis, the binder?
“This,” Henry said, his fingers fiddling with the top of Jordan’s binder, “is okay. In my head, I kind of still see it as a sports bra type thing. But, yeah, the prosthesis, is a little too much too soon.”

Nodding, Jordan smiled. “Okay, no penis analog for now. But seriously, you’re still doing okay with everything? I know I have been a bit self-absorbed with this whole transition thing... a bit is an understatement, but you know what I mean. I forget sometimes, that this is a journey for you too. And if you need to talk to me about your fears over this, then talk to me. You’ve been amazing so far. I mean, you could have lived up to some of the horror stories I’ve read about partners of trans people.”

Henry’s eyes went wide. How could he think that of him? “No, I couldn’t. I- I could never. You’re... it for me, and that means I gotta face your hardships with you.”

Jordan kissed the tip of his nose. “Besides, there’s more to intimacy than sex, and I’d rather have that with you than sex with somebody else. Now, you need to get ready to go or you’re going to miss your train, and I have to get to class.”

He sighed. When he’d talked to his mom about this, he was hard-pressed to find a reason when she suggested he go talk to his brother. This was the same kid who on more than one occasion had voiced jokes laden with homophobia. Had Samwell really changed Will that much? God, Henry hoped so, because he was worried enough as it was. He didn’t need to fear his little brother’s reaction. “Maybe I want to miss my train. Syracuse gets a lot snow—Lake Effect and all—maybe I got snowed in.”

Jordan hugged him tightly. “You’ll be fine, but if it goes badly, I will find some way to come get you okay?”

“See this? This is why I love you. You just care about people so damn much. Go, go on and learn biology so you can one day save the world.”

He grinned. “I plan on it.”

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Looking around the lobby of Will’s residence hall, Henry tried to calm his nerves and take Jordan’s words to heart. Easier said than done though. He’d sent his brother three texts saying he was on campus and in his dorm lobby. All had gone unanswered, but that’s what he got for failing to take into account that Will was probably at class.

Even still, the student at the front desk had been eyeing him with suspicion for at least ten minutes while he stood there awkward and nervous before finally asking if he was there to see someone. Thankfully, Henry was still in college himself so he almost looked like he belonged. He’d said yes, that he was there to see his brother and had sent a message. He’d just keep waiting.

The student rolled his eyes and went back to engrossing himself in a textbook on fluid dynamics. Oh boy, what fun!

Off to one side of the lobby were a few chairs, so Henry indulged himself, setting down his duffle and deposited his butt into one of them to wait. His phone still had battery so he passed the time by playing Clash of Clans. About ten minutes later, movement from the front door caught his eye, and looking up, expecting to see Will, he saw a young man walk through the doors.

See, there was thing he’d been doing in secret since Jordan came out to him. He’d been checking out other men, just to see if he felt any sense of attraction. Jordan’s words that he only need be attracted to one man made sense, but Henry still thought he should feel something...right? He scrubbed his hands down his face in frustration before giving the young man a good once over.

Henry had always been able to admire men who had a good fashion sense. Must be nice, he thought, to be able to afford to dress the way they wanted. He’d admired the same blue-striped, Hugo Boss scarf at Macy’s back in December, but seventy dollars for a scarf was just too hefty a price tag for him to swallow. No matter how much he’d wanted it.

He was getting ahead of himself.

The young man looked sharp. Fine wool peacoat, great boots, leather gloves and what was probably an expensive haircut to go along with it. An objectively handsome face with nice eyes... the guy was handsome, but that’s it. Aesthetically pleasing, no sexual attraction.

His fear about ultimately breaking Jordan’s heart by no longer being attracted to him once he’d fully transitioned began to fester once more. He wanted to not let him down so badly that he was beginning to make himself sick with worry. Remember what Jordy said. ‘Be supportive, and still love me. That’s all I ask. I can’t make you be attracted to men in the same way you can’t make me be a woman.” There’s more to a relationship than sex, you tool.

Mentally berating himself was not going to do any good. He heard the tell-tale click of a formerly locked door opening then shutting once more, and he looked up to see none other than his brother walk out. About fucking time. Only before Henry could even speak, Will turned his attention to the dapper young man whose scarf he’d found himself once more coveting.

His brother’s normally stiff expression turned instantly soft in a way Henry had only seen him
have with Hannah. He waved to the man, who opened his leather messenger bag and pulled out a piece of paper.

“Look, Will! Professor Hartman gave me a glowing letter of recommendation” the man said, thick New York accent on display. As he spoke, his words almost sing-songy in their delivery, he bounced on the balls of his feet, clearly vibrating in excitement. “You know, the one who did work for Vertigo Comics? Part of DC?”

Will facepalmed, and Henry was just able to bite back his chuckle. Even he knew Vertigo was a DC imprint.

“He loved my portfolio. Especially my three-page Red Hood comic.”

Henry couldn’t see his brother’s hands clearly, but he was fairly certain he signed something in response, but maybe not. Will sometimes had wild hand gestures for emphasis. However, there was no mistaking the way Will threw his arms around the man’s neck, pulling him into a tight embrace before kissing him soundly.

Oh.

Uncomfortable and feeling like an intruder on an intimate moment, Henry rubbed the back of his neck and picked up his duffle as he stood. Talking to Will about Jordan (who Henry still thought should come out to Will himself, but this was what Jordan wanted, and Henry intended to honor his wishes damn it), suddenly seemed a lot less scary. And the fact he didn’t find himself attracted to the mystery young man was much less disappointing seeing as how he and Will were somehow involved.

Will broke the kiss just as Henry had made a couple of strides towards them, and his eyes went wide in panic. “Henry,” he choked out, “what’re…”

“I left you a message. Didn’t you-”

Will groaned, looking up at the ceiling. “Fucking phone charger.”

Having noticed Will’s expression, the young man looked over his shoulder at Henry.

“Um…this is awkward,” Will turned to the man beside him and began to sign. **Henry, this is Rafa, my boyfriend. I’m gay, and if you have a problem with that, please either keep your opinion to yourself or leave.**

Henry weighed his response carefully, because it would be a dick move to steal Will’s thunder at coming out with confessions of his own.

**I’m sorry my signing is not great. Nice to meet you, Rafa.** Then, he addressed Will directly, “I accept and support you fully, Will. That sort of topic is kinda why I’m here.” He waited for Will to interpret his words for Rafa before continuing. “Can we go somewhere to talk?”

Will moved back and forth on the balls of his feet, his weight shifting along with his thoughts. “I sort of have plans with-”

Rafa tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. “’S’okay, Will. I can take a rain check. If he came up here from New York, it’s clearly more important than us getting lunch. Nice to meet you too, Henry. We’re still on for dinner before the game though,” he said before kissing Will on the forehead and strolling out of the lobby.

Henry waited until they were in the hallway and out of earshot of the student at the front desk before speaking again. “I recognize that name sign you used for him. Hannah is talking about him when she signs Ninja Turtle isn’t she?”

“Yeah. She thinks he’s the coolest because he’s Deaf and still plays sports. So, you came all this way to what? Come out to me? You’re gay too?”

The elevator doors closed, lending them an air of privacy. “Not exactly. Well, maybe,” he sighed, “I don’t know what I am, but… Jordan is.”

“Who’s Jordan?”

“My boyfriend.”

For a moment, Will looked absolutely gobsmacked. “Boyfriend? What about Jessica? I can’t believe you didn’t tell me you broke up! What happened, man? You two were so happy the last time I saw you together. Is that why she wasn’t at Christ-”

He pressed a finger to Will’s lips to halt his rambling. “We didn’t break up. Jessica is Jordan’s dead name. He came out to me as trans, and I want to stay with him. I love him with my whole heart. I just don’t know what I am, what that makes me. And I’m so lost. See, I thought when I told Mom about it, and she suggested I come talk to you, that she meant, being here at Samwell, you might have made friends with trans people. I didn’t realize that she meant you were gay, and might have some insight.”

“You told mom about Je- Jordan?”

“Well no. Jordan told Mom; I was there too. Mom didn’t out you or anything. In case you wondered.”

“I didn’t. Shouldn’t Jordan be the one to have told me?”
Henry scratched his forehead. “Yeah, that’s what I thought, but he told me I could tell you. See, I was a little afraid of how you’d respond.”

“Wait. What? Did you think I would be rude to him? Why?”

“The jokes and stuff you used to say, the way you’d agree with our uncles…”

Will leaned against the back wall of the elevator. “I’m not proud of that. But those were the only ways I could process how much I hated myself for being the way I am. God, I internalized so much homophobia. You know how I came out to Dad? By begging him to find a way to fix me so I would want girls instead of boys. I’ll never forget the way he took my face in his hands and told me ‘No’, because I wasn’t broken, and I did not need to be fixed. It’s okay if you’re confused about your own sexuality. It took me until I got here and met Bitty, that’s a teammate by the way, to accept myself. I mean, he hasn’t strictly told us all he’s gay, but he’s got a boyfriend. So, he’s not exactly straight. The team...Bitty is the heart of our team.” He lay a hand on Henry’s shoulder. “You’ll figure yourself out, man.”

Henry sighed at stared up at the mirrored elevator ceiling. “I sure hope so.”

***

Henry took a sip from his bottle of beer. Never one to prefer IPS, especially in winter, he tried to deal with the bitter hop aftertaste. But when his choices for adult beverages included Natty Light (no, just no) or some mysterious concoction Will’s teammates called ‘Tub Juice’, he settled for the microbrew.

In front of him, he watched a throng of college students in various levels of inebriation talk, dance, drink more. The majority of the living room had been commandeered for a rousing game of beer pong, and when he said commandeered, he meant it. A petite yet terrifying woman introduced to him only as Lardo, team manager, told a bunch of students to ‘Scram, frogs, Imma bout to wreck these brahs’ and proceeded to run the table, winning multiple games in a row. It was really quite fascinating to watch.

He scanned the crowd hoping to find his brother for the simple sake of having some company. Discomfort at social events was something he and his brother had always had in common, as their dad had once told them, ‘We Poindexter men have never been the life of the party.. Leave that to your mom and sisters.’ So imagine his surprise when he finally found Will in the middle of the mob, a smile wider than he’d ever seen him wear brightening his face. Both his arms were wrapped around Rafa’s neck as they danced. Will dancing was an entirely foreign concept to Henry.

It was funny; watching his brother like this was like seeing him for the first time. Will was happy and sure of himself. Amazing how being able to be who he truly was without fear could change things.

“You look like a man who wishes he was anywhere else.”

Startled, Henry followed the sound of the deep, booming voice where he found Will’s giant teammate—Holster he thought his name was—taking a long swig from his red Solo cup. “Well, no, not really. Parties aren’t my thing though.”

“They weren’t your brother’s thing when he first got to Samwell either. Epiekesters have a way of bringing out your inner party animal.”

Henry nodded, weighing Holster’s words. “You sound like you speak from experience.”

“Me?” Holster chuckled, his shoulders shaking as he laughed. “No, I’ve always been a social butterfly. I am the truest definition of an extrovert. Don’t let my misanthropy about people as a whole fool you. I like being around friends way more than I like being alone.”

“Yeah, I can see that. I’m the opposite.”

Holster clapped him on the shoulder. “Curse of the introvert, I’m afraid.” Then, he paused as though he were pondering something. “Or I suppose that depends on how you look at it. Maybe you see it as a blessing that you can be by yourself. So, Dex was a bit cryptic surrounding your surprise visit. What brings you up to our humble Haus?”

“I...um…” He rubbed the back of his neck, unsure if he could and should say more.

Holster held up a hand. “Say no more. Personal reasons are not my business. You looking for some action? Cause my handsome boyfriend knows just about everyone. I am sure he could find you a willing someone.”

Ah his boyfriend. Henry distinctly remembered seeing the guy in the white snapback moments before Holster interrupted his thoughts. “You mean that same boyfriend who is currently macking on the hot blonde in the blue halter top?”

“L...um…” He rubbed the back of his neck, unsure if he could and should say more.

Holster held up a hand. “Say no more. Personal reasons are not my business. You looking for some action? Cause my handsome boyfriend knows just about everyone. I am sure he could find you a willing someone.”

Holster’s eyes went to a far off place as a look of utter bliss took over his face. “Yeah,” he said dreamily, “I am a lucky, lucky man. Well we both are. Listen Henry, if anyone tells you a committed threesome seems too complicated, they have clearly never been the filling in a three-person cuddle sandwich. The best damn thing on the planet. Though I gotta say, when March wears her hair all curly it does tend to hit me in the face when I’m middle spoon.”

“You have a girlfriend too?”
“Oh yeah. Me an’ Rans, well March was his girlfriend first, but see, I’ve been in love with him for a while. Hanging out with the two of them, well what can I say? Crushes are weird. I thought it would be tough, and at first it was a bit complicated, but it’s nice. It works well for us. I mean there is no way I could pull of Nursey’s quintet, but that kid is just meant to love people. How he can handle two boyfriends and two girlfriends who all are dating each other is beyond me.”

“Um, no I have a gir-” Henry stopped to chide himself. Get it correct, you asshole. Even accidentally misgendering him is still bad. “Boyfriend. Not interested in hookups.” Then, something clicked for Henry, and he the pressing need to get some answers overwhelmed him. “Wait, so you’re saying aside from my brother, my gay brother, on the team you have Bitty who has a boyfriend, you and Rans who are... bisexual?”

“Correct you are, Poindexter the Elder, correct you are.”

“But also Nursey who is bi-”

“Pan. The kid as he puts it, ‘sees no gender.’”

“And Rafa wh-”

“Whiskey. He’s likely pan too. Says he just digs hot people whoever they are. He refuses to label himself tho.”

“Right.” Sexual orientation was so damn complicated, he felt like he needed a chart or something. “And... those two?”

“Ollie and Wicky? Gay with capital G’s. Like the team has a sneaking suspicion they actually eloped over the summer and have told none of us.”

“Is the whole team Queer?” He smacked himself in the forehead. Oh my God, I am so sorry. That’s not something you’re supposed to say. I’ll um... show myself out.”

Holster caught him by the collar, stopping his hasty retreat. “Not so fast there. Yes, used as a negative, some, well most of us, see it as a slur. However, you can use it to describe yourself, reclaim that word and make it something good. You said you had a boyfriend, so you’re not straight either, kid.”

“Who you calling kid? I’m twenty-three.”

“And I’m almost twenty-five. Ergo, you = kid. My point was that you were fine in asking if we were all Queer. And no. Chowder is straight, well we think. He has said many times, how much he loves girls, and we’ve never heard him say anything about dudes. So if he’s not straight then he’s not correcting us. Which, yeah okay, that sounds super heteronormative out loud, but you’d have to be there. Tango, however, super duper straight. Said so himself. That’s it though. Rest of the team yeah. Queer. And none of us cares at all that there are a lot of guys into dudes on our team. Hell, half our team is dating dudes from the team.”

Holster’s words filled Henry with hope. “So Samwell is a pretty accepting place? For all in the LBGTAL...oh fuck I can’t remember all the letters. What am I missing?”

Once more, Holster clapped him on the back. “Just call us Soupies.”

“Soupies?”

“Well we’re a right ol’ cup of alphabet soup are we not? But yes. Samwell’s great. Love the place. Why? Worried about your baby bro?”

Henry shook his head. “No, he clearly fits in here, like he was born to attend Samwell,” he said pointing to where Will and Rafa had switched from dancing to making out against a living room wall. He was never going to get used to seeing his brother kiss someone, and it had nothing to do with him kissing a guy. Will had never really shown much interest in people at all growing up. He liked to keep most people at arm’s length, which had clearly been a defense mechanism. “I meant more for like... me. I have been putting off completing my last grad school applications, and-”

“Well, you better get cracking, apps are due soon.”

“Oh? You filling them out too?”

Holster took another drink. “Nope, I’ve been meeting with team personnel for Seattle. No more higher education for me. Rans tho, narrowing down med school choices was stressful. What are you studying?”

“Education.”

“Ah, teaching is a noble profession,” Holster said, his voice full of sage wisdom. “My mom’s a teacher. I respect anyone who goes into the field.”

But there was no way Henry could get out of asking about a couple more things on his mind. “How’s your nursing school?”

“Nursing? Asking for your boy?”

“Yeah. He’s gonna take a gap year, take some additional gen ed classes, but he wants to follow me wherever I go.”

“We have a good nursing school.”
He fiddled with the cuff of his sweater. “And like... you have gender neutral bathrooms?”

Holster’s brows drew together, in either concern or deep thought, Henry couldn’t discern. “I… am pretty sure we do... I think. I just know that students can use whatever bathroom matches their gender identity. There haven’t been any issues. I’ll have to get back to you on whether there are Gen Neu bathrooms or not. Honestly, I don’t look for them, because I don’t need them. But if you’re asking for yourself or even for your boyfriend...Samwell is a good place. We take care of each other. Cept those damn LAX bros.”

Then, as if by magic, from across the room Henry heard a “Ffffuck the LAX bros!” shouted out at the top of someone’s lungs.

Holster gestured in the direction of the voice. “See? Fuck the LAX bros indeed. Hate those assholes. Cept that kid Ricky. He’s an honorary member of the Samwell Hockey team. Rans named him Foxtrot. But all the rest of them…can just kiss my Jewish, hockey booty. Actually no. I don’t want them anywhere near it.”

And then, just like that, Holster was gone, disappearing into the mass of students like a ghostly baseball player into an Iowa cornfield. Henry shook his head, downed his beer, and then made his way to the beer pong table. Though he was sure to get his ass handed to him, he figured he could brave a game against Lardo and come out still alive.

Probably.

Whatever the outcome, either in beer pong or the final destination on his new road of self-discovery, Henry was sure of one thing. He didn't need to fit into any box other than the one he crafted for himself. Fffuck those LAX bros, and fffuck labels. He was Henry Joseph Poindexter, and he loved his boyfriend. There was no need to elaborate further for anyone besides himself.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

So, first I’d like to thank everyone who leaves such lovely comments on this fic. I am the worst at replying to them. See... I let them accumulate for some unknown reason, and then when I decide, ‘Hey I should respond’ there are too many in the inbox and I get overwhelmed and give up. A+ reasoning right there. So I appreciate all of you, I'm just shit at correspondence.

Secondly, and this is pretty important. This chapter was rough for me to write. It's a difficult subject matter, and as such, here are the necessary trigger warnings:

Chapter deals heavily with Rafa’s past trauma and current struggles with PTSD. While there is an entire scene with a PTSD flashback from an outsider’s perspective, I feel it is important to note that not everyone’s PTSD manifests in the same way. Rafa’s experience is not the same as the next persons. I have a very lovely person I discuss ideas for this fic with, and who has personal experience with PTSD. They help me make sure what I deem to be Rafa’s experience feels real.
Lovely friend, thanks so much for your willingness to help by sharing your struggles with me :) 

Track Listing for chapter:
Scene 1: “Here with Me”- Susie Suh & Robot Koch
end of Scene 2- end of chapter: “Hush”- Hellyeah

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dex pinched the bridge of his nose. Honestly, he was getting nowhere in this conversation. Frustrated, he switched his phone from his left ear to his right. “Henry, if Jordan liked flowers before coming out, he will like getting flowers now. And you know what? If he hasn’t told you otherwise, you’re not a mindreader, man. How the hell are you supposed to know? Plus, it’s Jordan. I sincerely doubt he’d drag you for buying him flowers. Hell, I don’t think that guy could drag anyone really. He’s like...the nicest person in the world.”

“Thanks.”

“For what?”

“How hard you are working to make sure you get his pronouns right whenever you talk to one of us. Because he said you haven’t screwed up once, and that...that means a lot to him, to both of us really. So thanks, and thanks for listen to me panic about whether it was okay to still get him flowers.”

“As a buddy and former teammate of mine would say, ‘Flowers aren’t gendered, brah,’” Dex said, trying to imitate Shitty’s voice to perfection. “Look, I showed up in the middle of The Bronx the day after Christmas with a bouquet of tropical flowers and a houseplant for Rafael. He loved them. Named the plant Pamela, then promptly bought another he named Harleen. He calls them the Girlfronds.” Dex fought his chuckle, but failed. “God, my boyfriend is such a dork. Anyway, my point was, give Jordan flowers.”

“Oh, before I forget. Can you tell Rafael thanks for the scarf and that he shouldn’t have. That is a lot of money to spend on someone he just met.”

Dex’s lips twitched in amusement. “It’s a secondhand scarf, Henry. Rafa, he’s good, scary good, at finding great deals in department stores and amazing barely worn things in thrift stores. As he puts it, ‘How else could I afford to dress this natty?’” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Whiskey come through the door into the lobby, “Hey, Henry, I gotta go. Let me know how he likes the gift,” he said, quickly ending the call as Whiskey approached.

“I feel under-dressed now,” he mumbled in reference to Whiskey’s charcoal colored cowl-neck and cable knit sweater, dress pants that should have been illegal in the way they hugged his thighs...oh God, those thighs.

“Mm, but you look good though,” Whiskey said, kissing his cheek.

Wait. I enunciated clearly enough for you to read?

I think so. Underdressed right?
Dex nodded, and then continued. *I wasn’t trying to make it difficult, just muttering to myself.*

_Figured as much.* He grabbed the front of Dex’s button down and pulled him in for a soft, taking a deep breath before pulling back. “Ah fuck, you smell good.”

Really? *It’s just Nursey’s shampoo. I ran out of mine. I don’t under-*

Whiskey covered his hands with his own. *Still good. You should start using that one. So, what is this date you had planned but wouldn’t tell me about?*

Oh, Bitty planned a fancy little dinner party at the Haus for the couples, well people on the team and their sweethearts. *Like a multiple date thing, said if he couldn’t spend the day with his boyfriend at least we all could have a safe place to cozy up.*

That’s cute. Where’s his boyfriend tonight?

Dex shifted back and forth on the balls of his feet trying to figure out how to answer Whiskey’s question. Bitty hadn’t told the new guys on the team about him and Jack yet, and no way in hell he was gonna spill the beans. *Couldn’t get off work.*

**Man, that’s rough.**

Dex picked the small gift bag up off the lobby floor, then turned to Whiskey. “Shall we?”

“Yeah.” Whiskey reached down and linked their hands together.

The walk across campus was strangely quiet for a Monday night. For the fourth time in their walk, Dex kicked his boots in the fresh-fallen powder, sending up a plume of downy soft flakes fluttering back down to the ground.

“Having fun?” Whiskey asked, and when Dex looked over at him standing there under the streetlamp, he saw the snow sticking to the knit fabric of Whiskey’s winter hat, little snowflakes clinging to his long lashes, a rosy hue blooming on his tawny cheeks. Dex would say he looked like an angel, but Whiskey was no angel.

Angels didn’t kiss like that.

“What? Something on my face?”

Realizing he’d been caught staring, Dex tried to play it cool. However, Dex was not cool, or calm or collected. Well, not often. *No. You just… look really good right now.*

Whiskey smiled, the full-dimpled kind where his eyes went squinty, crinkling at the corners. His plaid scarf had been wrapped around his neck in some fashionable way, ends tucked into his wool peacoat. He looked so warm and soft right then, there was no way Dex could resist pulling him in for a kiss.

“Mmm. What was that for?” he asked out of breath when they finally pulled apart.

Dex simply shook his head and signed *I love you,* which earned another heart-stopping smile and endearing flush of Whiskey’s cheeks before he signed in reciprocation. *Hey, did you want to do presents now or you know, after the party?*

**Now is good.** From the inside of his coat pocket, Whiskey pulled out a small bundle. *It’s not wrapped, just…* He unrolled the hat and tugged it onto Dex’s head. *I know your trapper hat sort of fell apart, and that your beanie isn’t warm at all. It fit okay?*

**It’s really nice, Rafa. Thank you.**

*It’s lined with rabbit fur. Then, as if a bit nervous about his gift, Whiskey backtracked. I hope you’re not ethically opposed to using fur. I tried to find a reputable company with a statement about how they obtain their fur. So, I mean, don’t worry. They said they buy from a supplier who also sells the rabbit meat. It’s not like that is wasted.*

It was Dex’s turn to stop rambling hands, and he grabbed Whiskey’s gloved fingers to silence them. *It’s fine. I love it. I’m sure you did your research, babe. He kissed Whiskey’s frigid nose and plucked the bag off the ground from where he’d set it when they stopped to start speaking. This is for you.*

Whiskey’s brows rose as he pulled the set of Copic markers from the bag. “How did you afford these? Just these twelve had to be like sixty dollars. Will, you didn’t need to spend so much on-”

Dex pressed a finger to his lips. *I learned of a...let’s call it business opportunity that paid pretty well.*

Whiskey rose an eyebrow at him. *Will, did you donate sperm?*

He tossed his head back, laughing. *That’s funny, because I tried. I thought why not get paid for doing something I do anyway? Plus, I’d get to help people. However, not only do you get paid at like the end of a contract of like six months of at least weekly donation, but they said I’m not attractive enough and they really don’t want gingers.* At the reminder of the unimpressed face on the receptionist’s face, not to mention the condescending tone about his looks when he walked in, he shuddered. *Honestly, Rafa. They looked at me like I was carrying some kind of toxic sperm.*
I'm sure mine's just fine. I come from a family of prolific breeders, so I know it's capable sperm. I'm smart, tall, good body, healthy. No major illnesses in my family. But I'm not cute enough?

Whiskey's hands were still for a minute while he pondered his response, and Dex knew he was trying to parse out what to say, because he got that furrow between his brows, left eyebrow rising slightly the way it always did when he was deep in thought. Well, Will, I hate to make this comparison, but I bet you anything that they'd reject me, too. And look at me. Plus they'd have said no to Eric, Derek, Justin, Ch- Come to think of it, they'd probably reject our whole team. Maybe not Adam if he walked in wearing his contacts or Tony if he didn't mention his mother's maiden name. You get where I'm going with this?

They only want tall, white males with classically attractive features?

Pretty much.

But why would anyone want to miss out on a chance for a really handsome genius child by rejecting Ransom's sperm? Come on, that's like genetic jackpot right there. Hell, if I were looking for a donor so I could have a child, I'd much rather have one as smart as him than a white kid. Just saying.

It is what it is. Yeah, not liking gingers is not racism but still a prejudice. But, you know who they'd be all over in a heartbeat? Those damn Lacrosse Chad's. They're like WASP'y sperm goldmines.

That's messed up on so many levels.

Whiskey cupped his cheeks. “And I know it won’t change what they said, but don’t listen to them, Will. You are attractive enough, more than enough. So what you have red hair, freckles...you are tall, in great shape, clear skin. Plus, like you said, smart. Athletic, great manual dexterity, and despite your hair trigger temper, you’d do anything for people you care about. If you ask me, then turning you away denied a couple in need of a potentially amazing child.”

Dex smiled at him, chest full with pride.

So anyway, your business venture? Amateur night at Shirts VS Skins? Whiskey signed with a chuckle.

No. Would that bother you?"

Only if I missed the chance to see you in a handyman get-up grinding on a pole. Bet that looks hot as hell. Anytime you wanna give me a private show wearing just a tool belt, be my guest.

Glad to know I have your support if I decide to become a stripper. No, I answered an ad on the student bulletin. Professor Kingsbury was looking for someone to help out his elderly mother once a week. Clean her house, take her out to run errands.

“Awww. That’s so sweet. You helping out old ladies.”

Dex shrugged. Guess so. Oh, before I forget. Henry said thanks for the scarf and that you really shouldn’t have spent so much.

Did you tell him I found it at a secondhand shop?

Yeah.

Good.

Gifts exchanged, they continued onto the Haus in beautiful silence, which was different than the ordinary silence they shared between them. Perfectly comfortable, warm, and without any rush, this silence felt safe. Dex wondered if Whiskey saw it that way, if he categorized his moments this way. Living in nothing but silence, he had to, right? Whiskey had to appreciate the subtle nuances in the way a moment could be silent and full of awkwardness, or how it could be tender and lovely. Hell, even stifled laughter when humor was not appropriate was its own kind of silence.

He wasn’t sure how many steps it took, but eventually, Dex noticed that their strides had synced up, his longer strides matched by Whiskey’s smaller ones. Was this the kind of thing his mom had talked about before, about how love just changed you sometimes, put you on the same wavelength with another, and when it happened to him Dex would understand what she meant? He suspected it was, because he certainly felt different since he and Whiskey had begun dating.

A small piled of snow, hardened by a recent thaw and refreeze tripped him up, and he stumbled, almost falling if not for Whiskey’s firm grip on his hand. Once righted, Whiskey straightened Dex’s hat for him. “Easy, I got ya.”

Dex didn’t dare let got of Whiskey’s hand to respond. So he did the next best thing, a lopsided grin followed by a quick kiss.

***
The inside of the Haus was warm and inviting, filled with far less people than Rafa had feared, and thankfully, he seemed to know everyone. Everyone looked absolutely besotted with their dates. Red, pink, and white decorations hung from the ceiling, adorned the walls. LED candles with simulated flames that flickered gave warm light, the kind that cast lovely shadows on the faces around the room. Eric had clearly put in a lot of effort to give everyone a nice Valentine’s date.

Still, this type of thing, dating, Valentine’s Day type dating was new for him, and as nice as it felt walking across campus with Will, this was a bit different. Would all these couples showering their sweethearts with romantic affection make Will realize how much Rafa was lacking in that area? Maybe Will only saw it as holding back, subdued affection. In reality though, was it that he was holding back, or more than he just didn’t get those ‘warm and fuzzies’ as strongly as everyone else? Fuck if he knew. An uncomfortable itch began to crawl under his skin.

Stop it. He told you he fell for you just the way you were. Will doesn’t need you to be sappy and sweet.

No matter how much he read, how enlightening those sites Derek had directed him to had been— he had no idea there was a spectrum of romantic orientation, that gray-romantic was a thing he could be. Prefixes like lamvano- and placio—novi—made his head swim. Nothing seemed to fit right, but reminded him he was different in yet another way—he couldn’t help but wonder, was he this way because of what happened, by what his father put him through, or was he always gonna be like this? He guessed he’d never know now.

A tap on his shoulder kept his thoughts from becoming too obtrusive. Beside him, Will stood, brows knit together in concern. Are you okay? Could he lie to Will for the sake of giving him a nice date? Probably, but he really didn’t want to. While his stomach did somersaults, Rafa’s hands remained still. Will’s warm hand caressed his cheek, and he leaned into it before the touch was gone just as quick. Sometimes, he really hated that to communicate with people, his and their hands needed to be free.

Hey, it’s just the team and their dates. No one new you haven’t met. Well except Luis, but you know OF him.

Rafa worried his bottom lip between his teeth. Does it bother you that I’m not… Like I am never going to write you poetry.

Oh thank God. I fucking hate poetry. Nursey tried to get me into it last year.

That’s not what I meant.

Will kissed his forehead before stepping back. Rafa, I’m more than okay that you’re not…”Schmoopy.”

Okay, he had to have read that wrong. “I’m not Snoopy? Why would I be a cartoon beagle?”

S-c-h-m-o-o-p-y.

“Oh.”

You’re you, and I love you just as you are.

With a smile, Rafa noticed Eric coming into the living room to make an announcement. He studied him, tried to read what he was saying, but it was too dark to make out his lips clearly enough. Instead, he waited for Will to interpret.

He said he made oven-roasted chicken and root vegetables, with a side salad of mixed greens. Dessert is mini tarts with cherries.

Sounds delicious.

Will reached down and took his hand, leading him into the dining room, where a couple extra card tables had been set up to accommodate the extra guests. Then, he gestured to a chair, silently asking if Rafa was okay with his choice of seats.

“This is fine.” He watched his teammates and sweethearts crowd into the dining room, and as the room filled up with more and more people, he felt trapped, like the air was being sucked out of the room. He felt a bit like… Chewbacca in a trash compactor—too big a body in too small a space. He focused on his breathing, glad for once that he couldn’t be bombarded with the cacophony of voices surrounding him.


For a brief moment, Bush’s ‘Machine Head’ played in his mind, and he had to chuckle as he mentally completed the lyrics, ‘Tied to a wheel fingers got to feel.’ Warm fingers squeezed the back of his neck, and on instinct, he flinched until he looked over and saw Will staring at him.

You okay?

Sorry, just a little anxious. Didn’t mean to recoil. I was…lost in my head. Boy was he lost in his head. How could he explain how his father used to grab him by the back of his neck like he was a naughty puppy, dragging him around by scruff that he didn’t have?

He licked his lips, his appetite all but gone. Feigning a smile to his teammates, Rafa tried to look
The nutty flavor of arugula on his tongue, he tried to pick apart and detect each flavor, every ingredient. See, focusing on little minutiae when his mind was racing had this amazing way to calm him down. Feeling panicked in a crowd? Admire the pieces of a man’s dapper outfit. Fine suit- Italian cut, four button vest with a subtle pinstripe patter. Chelsea brogues, black. Purple and silver striped tie. And so on.

But for whatever reason, it was not working tonight. Still, he was holding it together, however tenuous that hold might have been. That is, until mismatched stemware around the table began to fill with red liquid...dark red… blood red. Like a camera shutter, snapping closed at lightning speed, images flashed before his eyes. He screwed his lids shut in hopes that it would make it stop, but even though he tried that every time, that technique never worked. His chest tightened, caught in an invisible vice of panic. He could feel the blood pounding in his veins.

And then the full force of the smell hit him like a shock wave. That astringent bite he could now only associate with the horrific way it mixed with that ferric stench of blood. Oh God, so much blood, too much blood.

His stomach dropped out; his world spun. Though it had taken a while to recognize, by now he was an expert in that sensation of impending doom. Experience told him that next, his lungs would seize, cutting off his air supply before he’d disappear for a while. He was also an expert in that demoralizing feeling that even all his grounding efforts wouldn’t stave off his breakdown.

He shot up from his seat, his chair clattering to the hardwood with such force he could feel it through the floor. Not only that, but he could feel the eyes of everyone in the room focused on him and him alone. It was terrifying, the thought that they all would see what was coming, that whenever they thought of him in the future, they would remember how he looked when he got like this. That was enough to have him fleeing the room for the bathroom.

Too slow. He only made it three steps into the hallway before he emptied his stomach all over the wallpaper. It would surely need to be replaced. Good. He hated that pattern.

He crashed into the bathroom and slid to the ground in front of the door. In his head, angry shouts and pained yelps screamed at him. Covering his ears did no good. “Alliteration, caesura, euphony, hyperbaton, metaphor, ppp-polysyndenton, synec- synec- syn…”

And everything went white.

***

“How am I supposed to know what happened?” Dex threw up his hands.

“Um, you’re his boyfriend,” Holster said as if that explained anything. Newsflash. It didn’t.

“Yeah, but I’m not telepathic, Holster. I don’t-”

To his surprise, Bitty, who had been standing there with one arm folded across his chest gripping his upper arm, rubbing his chin with the other hand, spoke. “I know what it is. But Dex, I’m gonna need your help okay?”

“What- Okay.” There was no way he was going to deny Bitty anything he asked for in the moment so long as it pertained to Whiskey. Dex followed him out of the room and down the hall. They both stopped to grimace at the vomit on the wall.

“Hey! Someone come clean this up before it smells like death in here!”

Commotion broke out in the dining room, and Dex was sure he heard an intense match of rock, paper, scissors being used to determine the unlucky soul on puke patrol. Bitty stopped him outside the bathroom, keeping his voice to a low rumble.

“So, I haven’t really told anyone but Jack and Shitty, but some guys locked me in a closet overnight back in middle school. And I had a lot of trouble with bullying before that. It’s left me… well I get nervous in group hugs and small spaces, when too many people touch me at once or if I don’t initiate it. Do you follow me?”

Dex nodded. “I think so.”

Dex nodded. “I think so.”

“Now, I don’t know what his reaction was about, but I think it might be similar to the way I react, and I think I can help him.”

“Why do you need me?”

Bitty lowered his brows at him.

“Oh right. Sorry.”

His hand stopped inches from the door he’d been about to knock on. Really, Dex? Don’t be an idiot. “I just thought maybe he’d feel the knock,” he said, trying to play off his mistake as intentional. Instead, he tried the door handle only to find it locked.
“Well, shoot.” Bitty tapped his chin and thought a moment. “Oh, check above the door. Holster keeps a key for our bathroom up there.”

Sure enough, Dex’s fingers closed over the small, metal key and pulled it down. When he tried to hand it over, Bitty shook his head.

“Oh no, on the off-chance I’m wrong and he’s simply taking a leak, I’m not gonna be the one to walk in on him. You’re his boyfriend. He won’t get as mad at you.”

On any other occasion, Dex would roll his eyes at him. Instead, he opened the door slowly where he was met by the sight of Whiskey sitting up against the tub, hands fisted in his hair much the same way he had been in that haunted house. Visibly shaking and rocking back and forth, Whiskey was sobbing.

Dex moved towards him with caution, aware Rafa wouldn’t hear his approach. The bath math he sat upon would muffle any vibration Dex’s steps made.


Dex looked over his shoulder at Bitty’s confused expression. “Yeah, I don’t know either.”

Gently, he tapped on Whiskey’s shoulder only to have him recoil and scuttle across the floor to get as far away from him as quickly as possible. “Não me toque!” Clearly full of regret, he slammed a hand over his mouth, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’ll use English, I promise.”

Concerned about the vacant expression in Whiskey’s eyes, he knelt in front of him. Are you okay? Sick? To his surprise though, Whiskey showed no hint of recognition, of being able to interpret his signing, and that worried him.

Instead, Whiskey continued shaking, clawing at his scalp as he sobbed a gasping string of Portuguese.

“Socorro! Alguém nos ajude! Por favor ajude!”

“Bitty what do we do? Does this happen to you?”

Bitty stood there by the door, an immovable statue. “No. Not like this. I get panic attacks and nightmares. This does not happen to me,” he said, pointing to Whiskey. “Hey, could you go get me the whiteboard off the fridge?”

Dex didn’t need to be told twice and hurried to the kitchen, brushing off questions of concern from the rest of the team. “Here you go.” He handed the board to Bitty who began scrawling on it without haste. Dex peered over his shoulder as he wrote. “No, don’t say Whiskey. Use his name. Better yet, um write Rafinha. That’s R-a-f-i-n-h-a. It’s what his grandmother calls him.”

Bitty erased Whiskey’s nickname and replaced it with the term of endearment Dex had heard Vovó D use several times

You’re okay, Rafinha. You’re safe. Do you know where you are?

Whiskey’s chest heaved with every shallow breath; his eyes, wide like a caged animal, darted around the room, before they screwed shut, spilling a fresh flood of tears down his face. He shook his head. “No. Where’s my mamãe? I want to see my mamãe.”

Bitty looked over at Dex.

“His mom’s dead.”

“She is? I didn’t know that.”

“What should we tell him?”

Bitty scribbled once more on the board.

She’s on her way. Dex.

“No, write Gui. That’s what he calls me sometimes. It’s Will in Portuguese. Um, G-u-i.”

She’s on her way. Gui, called her before coming in here. You’re okay, Rafael. Just try and take deep breaths.
“Bitty, earlier in the school year, he mentioned he gets anxiety. He said something about using texture to ground himself. Could you ask him to do that?”

*Rafa, focus on the texture of the tile floor.*

Bitty demonstrated for him, and Dex waited with bated breath for Whiskey to oblige, but within a minute or two, he began to trace the grout lines with his fingers.

*Good. Now how about the texture of the bath mat over here.*

Unwilling to move closer to them, Whiskey shook his head vehemently.

*No? Okay, well what about the fabric of your sweater? Do you feel the bumps in the knit cables?*

Whiskey reached to his neck, rubbing the cowl between his fingers. Back and forth, back and forth, over and over without stopping or looking at either of them again for a good ten minutes.

“Bitty, I don’t think this is working?”

“I know. I’m not sure what to do. Maybe…” he trailed off, running a hand through his hair.

“You think appealing to another one of his senses would work?”

“Worth a try. What are you thinking?”

Dex licked his lips. “What fruit do you have in the kitchen?”

“I think Holster still has a container of pineapple in the fridge. Why? Where’re-”

Dex hurried out of the room once again, more than sure Whiskey was safe with Bitty. Well, who wouldn’t be? But yeah- Anyway.

“Hey, Dex?”

“What?” he snapped, spinning around in the kitchen to find a startled and upset Chowder, who looked like Dex had just slapped him. “Sorry, Chowder. No, everything is not okay. No, I can’t tell you why, because it’s not my story to tell. I… shouldn’t have taken it out on you.”

Chowder nodded. “Do you need some help?”

“Yeah. Bitty said there is some pineapple in the fridge.”

“Oh Holster finished that off this afternoon. But I have some clementines if that will work.” He nudged Dex out of the way and dug through the vegetable crisper until he found what he’d been searching for. “Here. I mean… is he okay?”

Dex rubbed his forehead. “He’ll be fine. Thanks for asking.” He gave him a pat on the shoulder and went back to the bathroom, kneeling down in front of Whiskey. He placed the unpeeled fruit in Whiskey’s hand before grabbing the whiteboard from Bitty.

*See, it’s not peeled. I thought you might want to do that yourself.*

With suspicious eyes and furrowed brows despite the tears that continued to make tracks down his face, Whiskey reached out and took it from him. He turned it over in his hands as though he were inspecting it. Then, with quaking hands, he peeled it, stopping to take a whiff of its citrusy scent.

*Hey, I’m not going to hurt you, but you look like you could use a hug.*
Dex felt like he was being interrogated by a string of unspoken questions given the way Whiskey stared at him. Tense seconds stretched into a long five minutes, but when Whiskey finally nodded, his whole posture crumpling once more, Dex breathed a sigh of relief.

He sat down next to Whiskey, laying an arm around his shoulders, and to Dex’s surprise, Whiskey took no time in collapsing into his chest, crying into the fabric of Dex’s shirt.

“How did you know to try the fruit?” Bitty asked, sitting down next to him.

“So you know how Ransom and Holster have cabinet full of Sriracha? And they like eat it on damn near everything?”

“Ugh do not remind me.”

“Well, Whiskey...eats fruit like those two eat Sriracha. Like snacks between meals? Fruit. Bowl of oatmeal for breakfast? Don’t forget the berries! He just really loves fruit, especially tropical. Over winter break,” he said, curling his arm around Whiskey so he could stroke his upper arm in small circles, “well there is this neat wooden bowl made of some type of teak wood that was always full of fruit, anyway I think he emptied that thing five times in the week I was there. I thought bringing him some to eat might remind him of home and bring him around.”

Bitty turned towards him, “That’s clever, Dex.”

One moment, there was a lull in the conversation, and the next saw Whiskey flinching violently, pushing Dex’s arm away like it was toxic. He scrambled away, gasping for breath. However, when Whiskey saw the two of them, his breath evened out, and he relaxed against the the wall. Then, that familiar sadness of being old for his age settled back into his eyes, and what Dex wouldn’t give to never see him that way again.

Whiskey sighed, “Damn it. How long was I gone?”

Dex shrugged and signed: **Maybe ten minutes, fifteen tops**

“Better than days I suppose” he said, rubbing his forehead. “Before you ask, no. I have no idea where I went or what I said. I never do. Just ask Vovó D about that time when I was sixt- actually don’t ask that.”

He rolled over onto all fours and pushed himself to standing, a little shaky on his feet, and Dex was beside him in an instant to stabilize him. Whiskey dropped his head down on Dex’s shoulder.

“I should probably explain myself. People are gonna be confused.”

Dex grabbed his phone, handing it to him as he spoke.

“You don’t owe anyone anything, tartarugainha.

“Yeah, but it might help you all the next time this happens,” he said, gesturing around the bathroom with a dejected sigh, “because this will happen again.”

Dex shrugged and signed: **Maybe ten minutes, fifteen tops**

When a wintery, morning ray of sunlight hit him in the face, Rafa rolled over with a groan, before a hot flash of panic stole his breath away. His dorm room was on the West side of the building. His eyelids snapped open, and for a second, a very brief second, he had no idea where he was. Before he could succumb to his anxiety, he took in the explosion of teal and Sharks memorabilia. Oh yeah.

After a flashback, an intense one like the one the night before, he always had this strange sensation of being present but also not present- one foot out the door sort of feeling. It was as though he was watching his life from an outsider’s perspective. He’d told Dr. Martinez that once, and she’d been quick to give it a name, telling him that in moments like those, he was dissociating. She also allayed his fears that, no, that did not mean he had *alters* as she called them, but that his experience was common with PTSD, and just to roll with it when it happens. It was only a problem if it was prolonged.

He felt bad about putting Chris out of his room, but then a heavy arm settled across his lower back. It was reassuring to say the least, and rather than dwell on it, he turned his head to the other side of the pillow where he was met by Will’s sleepy grin.

“Oh yeah.

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“Good morning,” he said, slowly, clearly. “How are you feeling?”

Rafa rolled over off his stomach, the way he always slept. An old remnant of all those times he lay face down on the floor to lessen the damage from vicious kicks was one he guessed he’d never break out of. Seldom could he be even relax in any position other than on his stomach. Spooning had always been almost impossible for him, but he was coming around. Once he’d told Will he’d probably only be able to be big spoon just because his mind would probably find some way to make him feel restrained and then he’d panic, well, after that Will didn’t seem to press much. Rafa suspected that Will had been hoping all along that he preferred to be big spoon.

Will poked him in the nose. “Beep. Where’d you go just now? Still with me?”

Rafa rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. “Yeah, I’m still here.” *Breathe in. Hold 2-3-4-5-6-7-8. Breathe out. Breathe in. Hold... “So yeah. No matter how hard I work, steps I take, medication...even if I’ve been doing well for weeks, months, years, it can rear its ugly head...it’s*
not an easy thing for the other person in a relationship to deal with. I'm always gonna be this.” He squeezed his eyes shut, praying the tears stayed at bay.

Only when he felt Will shift beside him, did he open them. Now sitting, a deep furrow had set into Will’s brows; the corners of his eyes had turned down. Rafa thought he saw a bit of a tremble to his lip.

**Rafa...are you trying to break up with me?**

Rafa bolted up in bed and clutched Will’s shaking hands. “No! No! Why would you think that? No, just no. Not at all. I’m just... Love won’t fix me. I was...uh…” He sighed. “I was giving you an out if it was too much.”

Will pressed their foreheads together and caressed his cheek, running a thumb along Rafa’s lower lip. He felt Will’s breath, warm, on his face, felt his lips move. So he knew words were spoken, but he waited for Will to pull back and repeat himself.

*I don’t want an out. I’m in if you are.*

Yeah. I’m in.

**Good, because you told Bitty you wanted to talk to the team about what happened.**

Rafa groaned, “Damm it. Past Rafael, you’re an asshole. Sincerely, Present Rafael who hates your guts right now.”

***

The springs on the green couch in the Haus had long since given out, and as such, Rafa had sunk too far down into the cushion. He didn’t like it; it made him feel off-kilter. One-by-one, every member of his team who’d been there to witness the beginning of his most recent breakdown, filtered into the living room. Confused, yet expectant faces stared back at him. He hated that too.

The floor beneath his bouncing leg shook almost as badly as his hands did, and his socks did little to dull the vibration. He did his best to keep his eyes trained on the floor, on the pattern of the pajama pants he’d borrowed from… actually he had no idea whose clothes he was wearing. Not that he minded; they were soft and comforting. He suspected Will had asked around for the softest pajamas that would fit him, fully aware of how sensitive he was to fabric texture.

A light squeeze to his shoulder turned his attention away from the mundane details of the room. Will had sat in front of him, perched atop the coffee table. **Bitty explained to them that you wanted to talk, but that it was probably a difficult topic. So take as long as you need, and if you need to bail. Bail, okay?**

Rafa lifted his clammy hands up off his knees, but they were shaking too badly for him to sign a damn thing, and he sure as hell wasn’t ready to talk yet. Will, it seemed, understood, and took hold of his hands, mouthing ‘You okay?’

A nigh imperceptible nod was all he could manage. How long, he wondered, could he keep them all waiting before the awkward silence became too much? That was the ironic part. Though he lived in silence every minute of every day, even he could tell when that silence was uncomfortable.

With a sigh, he took the leap and began. “We can’t all come from perfect families, so damn picturesque that they belong on the front of a fucking magazine. You know? Before I went to live with Vovó D, that was mine. My dad was...” His pulse skyrocketed, and he worried his upper lip between his teeth. “So, you’re all familiar with the concept of triggers, yeah? When Tony’s face took on that I’m confused’ look Rafa had come to know well, he licked his lips. “Could someone fill him in?” He pointed to Tony. “I don’t want to talk more than I need to.”

He saw Justin’s lips move, but he didn’t pay attention long enough to read his explanation. Like he needed a reminder of how much his fucked up brain hated him, right? When Will looked over his shoulder, Rafa assumed he was asking if Tony was good for him to continue.

“’m I good, Gui?”

Will reached out and gave a quick stroke to his cheek.

“Well, right. So everybody has something that just kind of unhinges them to some degree. Justin has his exams; Adam has confined spaces. I have...ha...what don’t I have?” His chuckled came out as more of a scoff, but his words had truth to them.

Over the years, his list had grown long, but he’d surprised himself just how capable he was to recognize the problem and stave off disaster. But other triggers, the big ones, he was... not so successful. Understatement of the fucking century.

“Don’t throw something at me... ever. Even if you’re joking and it’s only a fucking pillow. Just don’t, please. Um, the last time someone—” He took a shuddering breath, eyelids slamming shut. How could he explain this? How could he put into words how paralyzing it was to have six weeks of his life, eight years after the fact, that he couldn’t remember, that he would never remember? How could he paint a picture of the sheer terror he felt when he finally came back to himself only to stare at the foreign walls of a room he’d never seen before, being supervised by
mental health staff he’d never met who talked to him as though he should know them?

He couldn’t. He couldn’t do this.

On reflex, he curled his hands into fists, uncurled them, and repeated several times. It was a Pavlovian response by now whenever the quaking in his hands tried to move up his arms and take over his whole body. That was step one. Step two? He focused on the edge of the couch cushions and the way the threads were coming unsewn. They didn’t match the ones around them, same color yes, but the stitches were different. His fingertips walked along the cushion, and he tried to catalog what exactly made them feel different. Cross-stitched in the repair, whereas...a machine locked stitch ran the rest of the way along the cushion. He let himself entertain the idea of one of the team sitting on the floor, a spool of thread sitting next to him and a darning needle between his fingers.

Someone shook him.

“What? Oh. Sorry. Yeah, I’m okay.” It was the answer to a question he wasn’t sure anyone had asked. “I’m okay. I’m okay,” he repeated, each time a little quieter than the last. “Um, where was I?”

You said not to throw anything at you. Will’s normally steady hands had a slight tremor to them as he signed, his eyes turning down a bit at the corners. Rafa guessed Will was putting the pieces together, and he’d give anything to have him never complete that puzzle, not to see just how badly those same pieces had been ripped apart and thrown about so many. fucking. times. They’d been kicked and punched, slapped around and screamed at that they shouldn’t exist- should have been destroyed before they ever began. Some pieces were missing and long since destroyed. No one should have to see that puzzle to completion.

He rubbed the space between his brows with his fingers, pushing his thumbs into his eyes a bit to stop any tears before they could start. Not a moment too soon, because the first nuances of intrusive thoughts started to creep into his awareness

“You’re useless! Can’t you do anything right?”

“Stop crying and get off the floor! Take it like a man and stop your fucking cry-”

He felt the whimper leave his throat and clapped a hand over his mouth, speaking from behind it

“Right. Don’t make me watch Thelma and Louise or Fried Green Tomatoes or movies like Adam, you like those two. Take a guess at which scenes will send me running for the bathroom.”

He watched Adam’s lips part as though he was expelling his breath in a huff of shock. Yeah, he knew all-right. “But sudden darkness and um... wine. That’s the big one. Specifically? Red wine, like what we had last night. Um… it’s smell,” he felt his voice break. “It’s uh… I… um…”

Breathe, Rafael. Breathe.

“I-” Why couldn’t he take a full breath? The way his chest tightened felt just like- No. No. No. “Alliteration, caesura, euph- euph- euphony…. Oh fuck.” He ran both hands through his hair, raking his nails against his scalp. You can do this. They have your back. Remember? It’s part of the bylaws.

He forced his lungs to take a breath. “When I was seven...after years of both of us suffering horrible abuse, my mom left my father.” His whole body trembled, but he pressed on.

“Six months later, he found us. Then, twelve days after my eighth birthday my father tried to beat me to death with an unopened bottle of red wine, and sometime after I lost consciousness...he murdered my mom.”

After a tense minute, where Rafa was sure he was going to be sick, he told them as best he could about his PTSD and what to do when they see he needs help. “The most important thing, when I get like I was last night… don’t touch me. Let me initiate physical contact.”

Someone asked a question, and while he waited for Dex to interpret for him, his mind wandered. At some point he’d begun talking again, but if asked he couldn’t tell you what question he was answering or what he said. “I can’t have an MRI; I got too much metal in me for that. There are pins in my arm, plates on my ribs. I have a complicated system of metal that fused my sternum… um… You ever hear a bone break? Not a pretty sound, and when I think about how the last thing I heard was the s-” He licked his lips and held his breath for as long as he could in hopes it would slow his racing heart. “The last sound I ever heard was my skull shattering. And then the blood. Oh God the blood and the bottle broke and the smell of the wine and the way it mixed and and and…”

He was losing control; he could feel it. There was ice in his veins, a prickly numbness spreading up his limbs. “I, I uh… I have to stop. Sorry,” he said as he fled the room.

***

Rafa’s white knuckles gripped the stair railing. He’d picked this spot on purpose, having run his fingers along the grain to find a rough spot in which he could focus on the texture. “You’re okay, Rafael. You’re safe. That was a long time ago. You’re in college now, and he can’t hurt you any-”

He closed his eyes, exhaling slowly. When he finally owned them, he saw Will standing beside him.

You don’t have to keep talking about it. No one would hold it against you if you have to stop.
“I know.” Hot tears stung his eyes. He let go of the railing and stared at his quaking hands.
“Why are they shaking? Why won’t they stop shaking, Will? I can’t- I-?”

Rather than say a word, Will spread his arms, a silent offering. Rafa took two steps and crumpled into his chest. Will’s arms, warm and strong, closed around him.


Will's hand rubbed soothing circles into his back, but he didn’t speak; the lack of vibration rumbling in his chest told Rafa as much.

“And, and, and… I miss my mamãe. I miss her. It’s not fair; she was so young. She was a good person. She deserved so much better.”

And that was it. Rafa couldn’t talk about this anymore today. Will seemed to understand that and held him tighter, letting him cry out twelve years of sadness and grief, hatred and anger as he stood there. He was a strong and solid support as Rafa fell apart, and God did he love him for that.

Chapter End Notes

Portuguese used in chapter (and I wasn’t able to check the accuracy of my translation with my usual source—she was not available. So forgive me if these are off slightly. I tried my best):

“Mamãe, acorde, acorde, por favor. Não possa respirar. Mamãe, por favor” - Mama, wake up, wake up, please. I can’t breath. Mama, please.
“Não me toque!” - Don't touch me
“Socorro! Alguém nos ajude! Por favor ajude!” - Help! (as an interjection) Somebody help us! Please, help!”

Also thanks to tinypotatos for coining ’girlfronds’
“Just a bit to the left. Oh God. Yes, that’s the spot.” Rafa tried to focus on the hideous floral pattern of the comforter in front of his eyes, but it was too close. Everything remained just out of focus. Settled like a sturdy weight on his hips, was Will, who had been using those strong hands of his to work on a knot in between Rafa’s shoulder blades.

“Hmm. A tree?” Honestly, he had no idea what it was that Will had just traced into his skin. Sometimes the attempts were a lot more clear. If Rafa could try and make pictures out of Will’s freckles, scrawl on his skin with marker, then Will could trace little pictures and make him guess them, he supposed.

Rafa turned his head to read his phone.

No. It was a giraffe.

“Bullshit. No way in hell that was a damn giraffe.” He felt Will’s laugh as it shook the bed in their hotel room in Wisconsin.

“You’re right. It wasn’t a giraffe. It was a sheep, however.

“Oh huh, sure it wa-” Will cut off Rafa’s words as he went back to kneading his shoulder. He groaned, “I wish I knew what the hell I did to my shoulder.” He closed his eyes, savoring the feel of Will’s hands on him. Will, he’d learned, was the type of person who ran warm, and his hands felt like a heating pad on his knotted muscles. “Oh fuck me, your hands are magic, Guilhermino. Fucking magic.”

Will stopped massaging and shifted upon his hips several times.

“You okay?”

Rafa’s phone screen remained blank. “Will?” Then, Will shifted once more. Oh. Oh…. “Didn’t realize you had a thing for my shoulders, Gui.”

Suddenly, Will’s weight was gone, and Rafa found himself rolled onto his back, staring him right in his flushed and freckled face.

It’s… It’s not that, Rafa. It’s… If possible, Will’s cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red.

“I wish you could hear how hot you sound. With your voice and the moaning when I hit a good spot. It’s driving me crazy.

Will rubbed the fingers of one hand down Rafa’s stomach, holding the phone screen in sight with the other.

Yeah, well I’ve never noticed. It’s not like you’re shirtless often. It’s… I like them. They’re cute.

Rafa opened his mouth to say something, paused, and then thought better of it. Will, however regarded him with shrew eyes.

Sorry, I didn’t mean anything by that. I didn’t mean that you were cute.

Don’t worry about it. I know when you say I am or something I’ve done is cute, you don’t mean in like a demeaning, infantilizing way. You mean it as an endearment, an appreciation. Just like when Vovó says it. Hell, she even calls me her sweet boy sometimes.

It was Will’s turn to raise a brow at him. So you’re saying I’m predictable?

Sometimes. Rafa smirked back at him.

Well, were you expecting this?

What?
Will pitched forward to kiss him, and then, the sneaky asshole poked him in the side. Rafa tried to wiggle away, laughing.

“You fight dirty, Gui.” Rafa retaliated by reaching out to tickle him behind his knee, and he didn’t let up even as Will tried to get free. This, of course brought on a fresh attack from him, going for Rafa’s underarms.

“I see how it is. Two can play that game.” He pushed his hips towards the ceiling, bucking Will off him, where he grabbed a bare foot and danced his fingers on the bottom of Will’s foot.

As they traded jabs back and forth, it devolved into a full-on tickle fight. When Will went for the kill: his belly button, Rafa’s full-body response was so intense, his writhing sent them both off the bed, tumbling onto the carpet where they both burst out laughing.

“Ow,” Rafa whined, rubbing the back of his head.

Sorry. Does it hurt bad?

“No, not too bad.”

Want me to kiss it better?

Rafa felt his cheeks flush. “You don’t have to d-”

Will straddled his hips once more, leaning over him, where Rafa expected a forehead kiss. What he got instead was…

“Did you just lick my nose?”

Will laughed but nodded.

“Funny, you don’t look like a puppy,” he said with a waggle of his brows. Rather than say anything back, he settled his hands around Will’s waist and pushed. Not hard, just enough to give himself the leverage to reverse their positions. “Want a tummy rub now that I got you on your back?”

Oh that’s how we’re gonna play it? I seem to remember you saying something along the lines of ‘Fuck me’. Thought that sounded like a fantastic pregame warmup.

Rafa’s mouth went dry, and he was positive he licked his lips, well pretty sure, kinda sure....maybe? Hell if he knew, to be fair, because his brain went off-line at the same time. So...instead? He snaked an arm under Will’s arm, around his back, and yanked him down to meet his mouth. “ Couldn’t agree more,” he mumbled against Will’s lips.

Will gave him a cocky grin and started to kiss down Rafa’s stomach, taking his sweet (read: infuriatingly slow) time working open the button fly one damn button at a time.

“You’re doing that on purpose aren’t you? Trying to kill me?”

There, that mischievous smirk Will just gave him? That said he was in for a ride, and Will proved him right, by tugging off his pants in one smooth action and began to mouth at his cock through his underwear.

“Oh God, you are trying to kill me. Go ahead then, give me the good death.”

Will looked up Rafa’s torso at him and mouthed ‘Famous last words’. Rafa threw an arm over his eyes, because the sight of Will sucking him down in one go would have sent him over the edge far quicker than he would have liked, and he braced himself for what was sure to be an intense horizontal workout.

***

Dex plopped down onto the bench, sucking wind. He’d gone hard as hell on that last shift for all the good it had done. Some gargantuan defenseman for Wisconsin had slammed Whiskey into the boards, and well, it threw Dex off his guard. He never caught back up to the play. Hell, the Badgers had ended up with an odd-man rush because of him. Never mind, he’d mentally scold himself later.

Honestly though, forwards should not be allowed to be that huge. It was... wrong.

He took a long swig of his bottle, casting a glance down the bench where Whiskey, Tango sat. His heart did this thing now, whenever Whiskey locked eyes with him, where it tripped and then tried to play it off as nonchalance. It was on one hand, annoying, on the other… awesome. If you asked him what compelled him to do what he did next, he’d be at a loss, but he winked at him, honest to God, winked.

The smiling chuckle and kissy face he got in return made his heart’s clumsiness worth it though.

So, he watched his team give a valiant effort to break the 2-2 tie they had going, but as the minutes ticked down in the third, it seemed they were destined for overtime. That is, until the fourth D-line came off, and Ransom and Holster skated after the puck. They really were too damn in sync. Scary. Still, the pair of them managed to get to the blue line and keep the puck on sides before Wisconsin could clear it out of their zone.
Back and forth, they passed the puck. Back and forth, up to Bitty, who passed the puck cross ice to Ollie. All of it so routine, he found himself daydreaming for just a moment. When he heard the crowd cheer, he assumed it was because the Badgers had cleared the zone. So he shook himself out of his thoughts just in time to see two Wisconsin forwards ready to double team poor Bitty in the corner. Oh man. Jack was not going to be ha-

Huh, would you look at that? Bitty saw the hit coming and ducked, straight up ducked, under one of the opposing forward’s arms. Dex found it comical, the way the two guys smashed into one another, bouncing off like a pair of Looney Tunes characters. His amusement came to a screeching halt moments later when the puck hit the tape of Ransom’s stick. The guy didn’t even need to look to know where Holster was on the ice, just sent a nice saucer pass over to Holster, who had his stick cocked and waiting.

Dex heard the slap of the stick blade as it hit the ice, and moments later the buzz of the goal horn sounding. The Samwell bench erupted in cheers, and the on-ice cellies were exhilarated as ever.

Frankly, he was surprised Ransom had the guts to plant a big kiss on Holster’s helmet—oh to have that courage—but he figured the no-homo world of men’s hockey would brush it off as a ‘bro-kiss’ anyway. If they only knew.

The remaining three minutes on the game clock ticked down until ten, nine…..five, four, three, two, one. Their bench cleared to cheer the rest of the team. And, in the way road wins always did, the mood sobered quickly with the realization that there would be no kegster to celebrate.

Back in the locker room, Dex laughed as Ransom and Holster had already called March, putting her on speaker phone to share their news about their involvement in the game-winning goal. Her bright voice was interrupted when Farmer called out ‘Good game, Sweetie! You’re the best goalie I know!”

“FINNNNNNNE!” Nursey had called out, without missing a beat.

Chowder blushed but thanked her, and soon it was business as usual, everyone rushing to remove their gear and hit the showers. Several of the guys cheered when Ransom announced that one of the better nightclubs, Overdrive, in Madison was having an 18+ night, and they all made plans to go out for a few hours in order to make the midnight team curfew.

When he looked for Whiskey to relay the information, Dex found him at his locker, wincing as he tried to pull off his chest pads. Without thinking, he crossed the room to help him out.

“You okay? I’ll be fine.

Most of the team is going out to a club that has an 18 and up thing going on tonight. I know how much you like the lights. You in?

He watched Whiskey hesitate for a moment before shaking his head.

Okay. Want me to stay in with you? E-U T-E A-M-O, Rafa. He grinned as he fingerspelled it out, knowing that this way, they would escape the “Fine Police.”

Whiskey smiled but shook his head. No, that’s okay. Go have fun. “Te amo tanto, Guilhermino.”

***

Rafa rose from the chair at the small desk in the hotel room, stretching his arms above his head and shaking out his hands. Once he’d stowed his supplies, he grabbed his toiletries bag and a pair of sweats. See, he’d tried to just head to bed when he got back to the hotel room, but he’d tossed and turned, unable to get comfortable. No matter how he lay—even trying to sleep on his back or side, shocker!—his shoulder ached something terrible.

So, he had decided to do what he always did anytime he couldn’t sleep: get in some art practice. A couple weeks before, he’d had a moment of intense creative inspiration and had been working in his spare time to flesh out an idea for a graphic novel and original superhero. Honestly, it had started bleeding over into his not spare time as well. It had been a while since an artistic idea had gripped him so intensely. Still, sitting and leaning over a sketchpad would only have been a bad idea if it was his right shoulder that was bruised to hell. It was, however, a terrible idea to sit and draw with his left shoulder in so much pain.

Once inside the bathroom, he kneaded his muscle as he waited for the water to heat up. “I just had to be a Southpaw,” he groaned, cursing his luck.

The bathroom slowly filled with steam, and he stepped under the spray, delighting in the harsh sting of too-hot water. Maybe that would be enough to work that knot free, leaving him with only the contusion to worry about. He didn’t intend to scoff at his wishful thinking, but what can you do?

Curling his fingers around his shampoo bar, he worked it over his hair and scalp, using his fingertips to massage away any remaining stress of the game. He’d been in such a rush to get back to the hotel, that he hadn’t bothered to shower in the locker room, and to be honest, he kind
of regretted it. Good thing his and Will’s room had two beds, because he was pretty sure the one he’d tried to sleep in earlier reeked of sweat. Excellent life decisions, Rafael.

He felt the floor of the tub vibrate, and briefly, he wondered if a herd of rambunctious school children on an overnight field trip were stampeding down the hall before he thought better of it and went back to his shower. When the lights flickered overhead, he began to get suspicious. Quickly, he rinsed out the rest of his shampoo, and shut off the water. He stepped out, tugging on his sweatpants. He’d just opened the room door when a series of lights began to flash inside his room. Oh oh.

Without hesitation, he followed the actions of the other hotel guests and fled the Badger Hotel. It was once he was standing in a growing crowd of people outside he realized that not only had he left his phone inside, he was also standing outside with no shirt, shoes or coat, with wet hair...in Wisconsin in fucking February.

Shit.

***

“Whoa there, Nursey,” Dex groaned, as he reached out to grab his collar before he tripped off the curb outside Overdrive into oncoming traffic. “Honestly, who the Hell bought him booze?”

Holster bumped into his shoulder and gave Dex an inebriated grin around the lollipop he’d bought off a bachelorette’s sucker bouquet that said ‘Suck for a buck’...Straight people could be so weird.

“You didn’t!”

“Nope!” he said, popping the ‘P’ as loud as he could before passing the bright pink, Charms Blowpop to an equally tipsy Ransom, who thought nothing of sticking the candy in his mouth, practically fellating it. “But those ladies sure loved to share their cosmos with Nursey here.” He winked.

Dex pinched the bridge of his nose, lamenting under his breath about how he always seemed to end up on Nursey Patrol. ‘Oh, but you’re so responsible, Dex,’ ‘He behaves better around you, Dex,’ ‘and ‘ You don’t let him get into trouble, Dex.’ Traitors, the lot of them. Just once… couldn’t it go to someone else?

With Nursey securely righted on his own two feet and elbows linked with Lardo, Dex shoved his hands back in his coat pockets to shield them from the winter cold. As they passed a bank on their walk back to the hotel, he shuddered at the temperature reading as it lit up the marquee display. It had been a while since he’d seen temps that low.

A fire engine roared past them, sirens blaring. Moments later, a couple cop cars and an ambulance followed suit.

“Dude! You think we’ll walk past a car wreck?” Nursey slurred behind him.

Rather than answer his question, Dex kept walking.

“Rans, Ransypoo. I love firefighters. Maybe I should be one when I gra—”

Ransom was quick to shut him up. “No! I don’t think that is a good idea!”

“But, whyyyyy?” Holster whined as he nuzzled into Ransom’s shoulder. “I’d look so hot in that get-up. Don’t you think I’d look hot?”

“It’s mad dangerous, bro. No. Just no.”

“Two words, my broest of bros, Hunky Firefighter Calendar.”

Ransom leaned over and kissed his cheek, earning a chorus of ‘FINNE!’ from Bitty and Chowder. “Still no. I’m using boyfriend executive power. Don’t make me pull March into it too. Then it would be two against one and you’d be effectively vetoed.”

“Why don’t you like fun?”

“Sweet Jesus, it is cold here! How do people live in this damn state?” Bitty rubbed his hands up and down his arms to try and warm himself. “And I thought Massachusetts was cold!”

Their brief moment of silence came to a halt when another fire truck sped past. As they rounded the corner onto W Johnson St, Dex could make out an orange glow a few blocks away. “Nursey, I think we might actually pass a structure fire though.”

Dex scrolled through his phone and Google Maps to plan them a detour should they need it, and then fired a quick text to Whiskey to let him know he was almost back.

“No way!”

“I don’t fucking believe it!”

His teammates’ cries made him look up to see that yes, he’d been correct about a structure fire. However, he didn’t expect to see their hotel as the one ablaze. “Oh no! My Magic Bullet!” Bitty swore at the heavens.
Holster draped an arm over Bitty's shoulders. "Bitty, Bittle, Bits-bits. Now is not the time to worry about your favorite vibrator perishing in a raging fire."

"Oh my God! I'm talking about a blender, Holster! You know... for smoothies!"

But their words began to blend together in Dex's ears. The world spun around him, and he wasn't sure when he'd begun running, but before he could even breathe, he found himself standing outside the safety perimeter, his head swimming. His fingers shook as he tried to send another text to Whiskey to make sure he was safe. Minutes ticked by with no response while they all stood huddled in a small crowd of people. Whether they were guests or rubberneckers, Dex couldn't say. In fact, he couldn't say much of anything. It took Bitty waving in front of his face to get his attention.

"Dex, are you okay?"

"Raf- He was going- What if...asleep? He won’t see...flashing alarm. What- He...my texts…” He couldn't breathe.

"Take a deep breath, William."

He thought he heard Bitty telling Lardo something about panic attacks, but that was ridiculous. He didn't get panic attacks. But he could feel his heart racing, struggled for breath, and felt like he was going to shake out of his skin. Hands helped him to lean against a parked car.

"Dex? I sent Bitty to go talk to a cop and let them know we can’t reach one of our friends who is deaf and maybe trapped inside. Okay? I need you to try and match my breathing. Can you do that?"

Dex stared at Lardo's mouth as she breathed and tried his best. Honestly, he did. But he couldn't stay focused for more than a few seconds or two. He needed to find Whiskey; nothing would calm him down until he did. His feet moved on their own accord as tears dripped from his eyes and froze to his cheeks. Through tear-clouded vision he scanned the crowd as he wandered, but none of them looked like Whiskey. He called out his name even though it would literally fall on deaf ears, but Dex had to do something. Never had he felt so helpless in his life.

"You okay, son?"

Dex looked in the direction of the voice where he found a cop. "Um...no." He gestured to the building. "My team. We’re staying here. I can’t reach- He’s deaf." He tried to wipe his eyes, but found the tears had already spilled over and joined the frozen crystals on his face.

"W-w-w-will?"

Dex would know that voice anywhere, and he wasted no time in rushing at Whiskey at wrapping him in his arms, rambling about how scared he was even though he knew Whiskey wouldn't hear them. It took only moments, however, for him to notice just how badly Whiskey was shaking, and he stepped back to look at him. No shoes, no shirt, and his hair had frozen into little chestnut icicles. He took off his mittens so he could sign. Rafael, why aren’t you wearing a coat?

After a brief, feeble attempt to get his quaking hands to sign, Whiskey gave up. “I w-w-was, sh-sh-sh-shirt.” His mouth seemed to be unable to form his next thought. “Nnno...on-only p-p-pants.”

How long have you been outside?

Whiskey blinked several times, brows drawn together.

How long?

"F-f-f-f-f-f-f-freezing f-f-f-freezing."

Dex gave him his coat and led Whiskey to the nearest ambulance. “Can you help us? He’s been outside for- well he doesn’t know how long, but he had no coat, shirt or shoes. I think his hair was wet too. And his lips are blue."

The paramedic took one look at Whiskey and then helped him into the ambulance, wrapping a warming blanket around him. “Okay, what’s your name?”

“Um, he’s deaf. He can speak though. His name is Rafael. He normally has a medical alert bracelet, but I- I don’t see it right now.”

“Can you sign?”

“Yeah.”

The paramedic sat Dex on the bench across from Whiskey as he took his vitals. “Can you ask him basic questions like if he knows where he is, how old he is, stuff like that? We need to guage his mental state.”

“Sure.”

Hey, do you know where you are?

“Amb-amb-ambulance. S’fire hotel.”

How old are you?
Whiskey gave his best sassy expression possible under the circumstances. "Tw-tw-twenty."

And what's your favorite food?

"Uh f-f-f-fuck you, Will. F's are h-h-hard with sh-sh-sh-shivering. You know it's f-f-f-feijoada."

Dex held up his hands in surrender. “Yeah, he’s not confused.” Why weren’t you sleeping?

“Sh-sh-shoulder hurt. C-c-c-couldn’t sleep.”

“I assume he means this bruise on his left shoulder,” the paramedic said.

“He got hit in our game tonight. Big ass Badger defenseman.”

As the EMT’s continued to monitor Whiskey’s condition, Dex stayed with him, unable to leave. Not that he would have even if he tried. I was so scared. I thought you wouldn’t wake up from just the light alarm.

Whiskey, and how he could smirk with as cold as he was, gave him a trembling chuckle. “B-b-bed sh-shaker.”

What?

“They give all k-k-kinds of good vibr-vibrations. C-c-can’t s-s-sleep through.” He gave what Dex assumed was supposed to be a wink, but looked a bit like a minor facial seizure given his uncoordinated muscles due to mild hypothermia.

When the paramedic mentioned that he needed to go tend to another patient and left them alone in the back of the ambulance, monitors still hooked up to Whiskey and ready to alert EMT’s should he need more attention, Dex seized the moment, leaning forward to kiss Whiskey. He poured every ounce of relief into it as he could. He was especially comforted to see that Whiskey’s shivering had grown less violent in the minutes he’d been in the ambulance.

“I’m okay, Gui,” Whiskey said against Dex’s lips and then pressed their foreheads together. “M’okay.”

Dex nodded, unable to put his thoughts into sign or even say them aloud, until a cold hand came up to cup his cheek.

I don’t know what I’d- You’ve just become so fucking important to me, Rafa, and I- I . As a whimper escaped his throat, he slapped a hand over his mouth. In the warmth of the ambulance, he was sure if he started crying this time, tears would fall freely.

“I love you too, Gui. I’m okay.” Whiskey opened his blanket, seemingly inviting Dex to sit beside him under the blanket. Who was he to refuse such an offer? “I’m okay.”

Chapter End Notes

Useless piece of writerly info: The Badger Hotel and Overdrive are in the exact locations of downtown Madison, Wisconsin’s Doubletree Hotel and Frequency night club.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Track listing:
Scene 1: “Dead Memories” - Slipknot
Scene 2: “Breaking the Law” - Motörhead
Scene 3 & 4: “Speed of Darkness” - Flogging Molly
Scene 5: “Love Illumination” - Franz Ferdinand

Scene five contains some canon typical drug use in the form of pot brownies, which are consumed with informed consent - the character is aware they are pot brownies when he eats them.

“It’s just…” Rafa rubbed the back of his shoulder and sighed. “It was naive of me to think all his friends in legal places had cut ties with him you know?” He looked away from the screen and to the plain white envelope sitting on the foot of his bed.

Over the years, his father- no, Daniel. Daniel had reached out to him, and each time the letter remained unopened. In most cases, after he confirmed to Vovó D that he did not want to read them, but that he didn’t care if she read them, she would burn them in the kitchen sink.

She read every one, he assumed to make sure the asshole wasn’t trying to manipulate his way back into Rafa’s life. Rafa never asked what was said in them. However, as he got older, the frequency of the letters decreased, and he thought Daniel had finally got the hint.

Apparently not. And now, it seemed he’d contacted some of his friends with government computer access to figure out his address. Or hell, maybe the fucker had caught one of Rafa’s games during his TV privileges and went from there.

Rafa scratched his brow. Had he taken his name off the student directory or not? Hell if he could remember.

But this time...Rafa had opened the envelope without reading the front, thinking it was a bill of some sort. Three lines in, and he’d damn near had a panic attack. It was probably only luck that he’d been able to get Skype going and call his grandmother before he really lost control.

“So what should I do?”

Her brows drew together; her face softened. What I think you should do is irrelevant. If you want to answer his letter, I won’t judge you. Even if it’s just to tell him to fuck right the hell off and never contact you again.

He barked out a laugh that rattled in his chest. “Yeah. I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

She went still for a moment before typing again. Maybe that’s something to bring up on your next online appointment with Dr. Martinez.

He nodded and changed the subject. “So, you got my sketches, Vovó?” Rafa watched as her typed assent appeared as captions on the TV screen. “Yeah, I sat down last night after I finished my reading for my history class. I only intended to make notes you know?” She nodded. “But like the words just sort of came flying out. Next time I looked at the clock, it had been three hours, and I’d written seven thousand words. So, I guess I’m really committed to this graphic novel. What did you think?”

The portable doorbell buzzer bounced across his bed. “Just a second. Someone is at the door.”

When he opened his door, Rafa was surprised to see Will standing there with his hands in his pockets, looking more than a little put out.

Hey, Will. What’s wrong?

He seemed to remember where he was and pulled his hands free. Oh. Nothing’s wrong. I mean I made an error somewhere in my coding assignment that, for the life of me, I can’t find. And I’ve been sexiled.

“Ouch. I’m Skyping with Vovó D, but you can come in.”

Will leaned forward and kissed the tip of his nose.

“You sap,” Rafa sassed as he flopped back down on his bed.

Hello, Will. Nice to see you again.

Rafa waited for Will to finish speaking and then sign his words: Yes, same to you. How have you been?

He let them speak back and forth for a moment or two, excusing himself to make a quick snack for the pair of them. Will took the half-sandwich from him with a hungry grin.

Thanks. I was just telling your grandma about Rans and Holster trying to kill us all with
suicides at practice this morning.

Don’t fucking remind me, Gui. My quads are still crying. He continued his explanation of his concept art with his grandmother as Will sat, in what Rafa assumed, was contented silence. Though he could discuss art with her for hours, he knew they both had other things to do. Not better, just other things.

“Amo você também, vovó.” As he ended the call, he felt a tap on his shoulder.

What’s this? Will asked pointing to the crumpled letter.

Daniel found my college address. He writes sometimes. I ignore them usually. Opened it by mistake.

Are you...are you okay?

Yeah. Vovó walked me through it.

Good. Will brushed Rafa’s hair out of his eyes. So...you busy? Or can we like cuddle and watch a movie? I’m in such a bad mood.

No, I’m done with my assignments. What did you have in mind?

How about, you pretend that snooty lawyer is your coding assignment and then watch T-rex eat it?

The sight of Will breaking out in full body laughter warmed him to the core and set his still rattled nerves at ease. “I take that as a yes. I'll get it set up if you wanna dig through my dresser for a pair of sweatpants. I promise I won’t chirp you when they end up too short.”

Oh hush. You know you love my long legs.

Rafa’s only response was a wink.

***

The orange jerseys skated around Dex in a blur. Princeton had been fired up and ready to crush Samwell from the opening puck drop. It was as though the crappy, unseasonably warm weather and its resulting thunderstorm, had supercharged their opponents. Truth be told, Dex and his team were struggling to keep up. Not even Bitty’s speed seemed to turn the tide in their favor. The lone saving grace of the game so far was the 1-1 tie halfway through the second period, courtesy of Ransom’s sick wrister after a perfect tape-to-tape pass from Holster.

Honestly, those two had only become more in sync since they started sleeping together...dating...dating March, the three- Dex shook himself out of his head. Whatever. Though it wasn’t for him, those three worked amazingly well, just like Nursey and his significant others. More power to them.

His stick reverberated as a Princeton d-man’s attempt to clear the zone caught his stick instead. Dex muscled his way along the boards, dumping it to the corner so he could go in for a line change. Thankfully, Ollie picked up the puck, but just as he turned to skate for their bench, he collided with the boards with a crunch.

Dazed, he looked over his shoulder at the hulking star center for Princeton pinning him to the boards. Dude was easily a few inches taller than Holster, probably had twenty pounds on him, which meant he found himself sandwiched between the boards and a player about eighty pounds heavier than him. So, not like he was going anywhere. The thing was about hockey, well to Dex anyway, was that though everything zipped by at lightning speed, not much time really passed, like- what would Rafa say here? Like Professor X halted time? Something like that anyway.

So, what to him felt like a fucking eternity with that massive arm halting his retreat to the bench was only like a moment or two. Out of the corner of his eye, Dex noticed the referee’s arm up in the air: a delayed penalty. Ha! Take that, Gigantor! Eventually, a Princeton player touched the puck, and the whistle sounded.

“Number 18, Princeton, five minutes for interference with significant contact,” the referee’s voice echoed from his mic.

In his mind it was really a case of simultaneous minors, one interference, one cross-checking, but who was he to complain about the extra minute of power play time? Only when the guilty player skated away, did Dex notice the pain in his ribs where the stick collided with his back. It took him a moment to get moving again, but with each stride, his chest burned. Tango noticed his distress and skated over to him, offering assistance in getting to the bench. There was no mistaking Whiskey’s worried expression as Dex left the ice, Tango’s help giving way to the team trainer’s. Quickly, he gave him the sign for ‘fine’ before making his way down the tunnel to the treatment room.

Dex hissed as Mack, the team trainer, helped him get off his sweater and chest pads.

“Ooh yeah, you’re gonna have a wicked bruise here right below your right shoulder blade. Can you lift your arm okay?”
Though it hurt, Dex had no trouble following Mack’s order. He did, however, shiver when cold fingers palpated the tender area.

“Sorry, I didn’t have a chance to warm my hands. I don’t feel any obvious breaks, but come on over.” Mack maneuvered Dex until he was perfectly positioned at the small x-ray machine before affixing the lead apron around his waist.

Knock on wood, but Dex had yet, in all his twenty years, to break a bone. While Mack went to work taking all the necessary images, Dex tried to keep his mind off the pain. “So give it to me straight, doc,” he chuckled as his double entendre, “Sorry. What’s the damage?”

Mack studied the x-rays. “No breaks. Looks like bad contusion. Technically, you’re not required to sit out the rest of the game, but take it from me, kid. You should. Bruised ribs are hard enough to breathe with on their own. If you add in the stress of the game, this game... I’ll tell Hall and Murray to use you only if necessary.”

“You’re the boss, Mack.”

Wincing once more as the training staff helped him back into his gear, Dex was anxious to get back on the bench, even if he wouldn’t be playing.

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His mind was elsewhere; there was no other way to say it. Rafa zipped around on the ice, puck striking the blade of his stick on occasion. The tell-tale shake of the biscuit hitting the blade was one of the best ways for him to notice the puck without skating with his head down, which, ask Eric Lindros, was a recipe for a concussive disaster. When he first started playing, Rafa had only been able to find wooden sticks, and they damped the vibration of the puck. Now, he was relieved to find composite sticks more readily available, even if his coaches frowned at the price tag of his sticks. It was...a necessary evil, he supposed.

He was digressing, however, the point was that he would rather be sitting on the bench beside Will, making sure his ribs were, in fact, okay. It was not that he didn’t believe him,--actually it was that a little. Will had this tendency to downplay things--but that Rafa needed the self-assurance with his own eyes. Ever since the third period had started, and even after returning to the bench, Will had remained there. Per Murray and Hall, he would only be used if necessary. It didn’t do much to convince him that Will was just fine, as he’d told him.

Rafa made a saucer pass over to Tony and then went hard into the corner when his blocked shot rebounded. Though Rafa wasn’t the tallest guy on the team, and certainly not the shortest, he did pride himself on being quite strong. His six foot frame held a lot of muscle and weight. At the beginning of the year, he recalled how Adam had laughed, shocked, to see the scale when he weighed in. It hadn’t been the first time that had happened. Though slim, he was densely built. Where was he going with this?

Fuck if he knew.

Samwell was unable to hold the zone, and Princeton cleared the puck. The arena lights flickered overhead. They’d done that a few times since the middle of the second. Rafa suspected that had also been a contributing factor to the way he just couldn’t focus on the game. Nerves were weird like that. Still, he skated to the bench on a change.

“Killer save, Chris!” He was on his feet as Chris snatched a blistering slap-shot out of the air like it was nothing. Guy was always doing that. Outside of the game, he was living embodiment of sunshine. On the ice…

Fucking Hell, it was like the guy was Bane. An absolute menace, which was his team’s gain and, for lack of a better word, every other team’s bane of existence. Pun totally intended.

His teammates shuffled down the bench as the fourth line skated off. See, he and Tony had started the year on that line, but found themselves moved up not once, but twice, a fact he’d been proud to tell Vovó D about.

Eric had an excellent scoring chance with a sick wrister towards the net, but nothing came of it. The rest of that shift was more of the same. More shots, peppering the Princeton goalie, and nothing.

The moment his feet hit the ice, he was determined to get his head out of his ass and get a quality shot. His determination, however, was cut short, as the lights flickered again. Flickered a second time, before the entire arena went dark. His heart rate, already fast from exertion, ratched up another notch.


Easier said than done, right? Because there he was in the middle of the damn ice where there had been no one around him. In the stands, he could see dozens of cell phones with their screens lit up, could see ushers with flashlights, but it made it hard for him to gauge the distance in the dark. His hands shook around his stick while he did his best to remain calm.

However, when the lights did not come back on, and he imagined both sets of coaches had told their teams to remain either on the bench or skate towards the bench, he was once again at a serious disadvantage. So, he tried something he didn’t like to do often, ask for help.
“Hey,” he said, unsure of his voice’s volume, “I don’t care what team you’re on, but if there is somebody near me, can you help me get to the bench?”

He felt someone tap him on the shoulder.

“If you’re talking, I’m the guy on Samwell that can’t hear you. Just, I’m disoriented as hell right now in the dark, and could really use some help.”

Whoever it was, grabbed his wrist, and tugged him, he assumed, to the Samwell bench.

***

The moment the lights went out, Dex had stood and moved down the bench to see who was still there. When he didn’t find Whiskey, he worried that it would be a repeat of the haunted house. The last thing he wanted was for him to slip into a panic attack in front of everyone.

“Hey, Holster! You got Whisk down there at your end?”

“No man, he just went out on the ice went the power went out.”

Dex tried to plead his case with Coach Murray, who told him in no specific terms to sit his ass down, because tripping over the boards and breaking a bone was the last thing they needed. His response was to point out that Whiskey, obviously, wouldn’t be able to follow the sound of their voices and was probably freaked as hell. That didn’t sway Coach as much as he hoped it would. So, he sat down with a huff, stewing with his rage.

“Yo, Samwell. I got your winger here, Viscaino I think. Seems a bit shaken.”

Even though darkness shrouded the bench, save for the jarring brightness of Coach Hall’s cellphone, which offered little in the way of visibility, Dex pushed his way towards the gate. He bumped into more than a few knees and elbows of teammates, offering apologies along the way.

“Bits? Can you take my gloves?” Once his hands were free, he took Whiskey’s wrist from the Princeton player. “Thanks man. He doesn’t do well in the dark.”

“No worries. I get it. Gotta suck when you’re already down one of your senses, to suddenly not have another.”

“Still, thanks. You didn’t have to help him, coulda left him alone on the ice.”

“Now that would’ve just been cruel.”

As the bite of the blades from the player’s skates moved away from their bench, Dex reached out and gingerly removed one of Whiskey’s gloves, uncurling his fingers and turning his palm upward. There, he traced out a ‘g’ followed by ‘u’ and an ‘i’.

“Hey, Will.”

Dex patted his cheek, curling his middle and fourth finger towards his palm as he pressed the sign for ‘I love you’ into Whiskey’s cheek. Though Whiskey leaned into the touch, Dex could feel him shaking. Lacing their fingers together, Dex helped him off the ice and down the bench into the tunnel that led to the locker room.

“I was keeping it together out there. I really was, Will,” his voice trembled just the same as his body did, and he took a deep breath. Dex heard the soft count to eight before Whiskey continued. “But then that other person started leading me somewhere, and I didn’t know who it was or where we were going. I guess was too much.”

Rather than try and spell out anything else he wanted or needed to say, Dex simply wrapped him in a hug, holding him tightly (all while ignoring the way his ribs protested the movement) until Whiskey’s body stilled.

It was about that time when he heard the harsh feedback of a megaphone filling the arena. “If I could have your attention, please. We’ve spoken to the power company, and it appears that lightning struck the transformer supplying power to Faber. There is no timeframe for power to be reinstated, and most of Samwell is currently in the same position we are. Arena staff has spoken to officials and both sets of coaches. Given there are only five minutes left in the game, all parties have agreed to call the game. Final score will remain a one-one tie. Ushers have flashlights and will assist you out of the arena safely. Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Guess we’re done for the night. Let’s hurry and shower before the hot water gets used up,” Whiskey said, a hint of a smile in his voice. “Please lead the way, my brave savior.”

Dex kissed his forehead, and picked up both their helmets off the ground in the tunnel before leading them both down to the locker room.

***

Dex craned his head and stared up at the ceiling in the Haus living room. Sporting a pleasant buzz,
he couldn’t be bothered to care about the mix of smells emanating from their hodge-podge collection of candles. Nor did he mind that everyone in attendance was in their pajamas, some containing more material than others. The body heat due to everyone’s proximity more than made up for the fact the Haus had an electric furnace. It was quickly approaching too warm, but then again, that could be the booze talking. Betsy 2.0, however, ran on gas, and Bitty wasted no time in maxing what he could mix by hand. Plus, Dex pretended he didn’t notice Shitty, visiting for the weekend, sneakin a pan of brownies into the oven to warm.

All he knew was that he was feeling no pain at all in his battered ribs.

Dex stretched out his legs, amused by the way the candlelight made the freckles on his legs look. There was a reason everyone looked better by the light of a candle. Glancing around the room, he couldn’t help but feel a bit hot under the collar at some of what happened around him. Look, he did everything he could to not look in the locker room, but it was damn hard to ignore people making out around him. Somewhere between Dex’s third and fourth beers, both Ransom and Holster had lost their shirts, and Dex would have to be blind not to be at least a tad turned on by the way those two were going at it with March upon Ransom’s lap, sandwiched in between them both. Now sure, he was gay as a guy could probably get, but the enthusiastic PDA happening in front of him was, for lack of a better word, hot. Nursey waxed poetically, pun intended, about the flames’ reflection in Amelia’s eyes as he lay with his head in her lap, his fingers intertwined with Andre’s who lay in a similar position beside him. Yuka had been there a minute ago…where the hell did she- whatever, it was not Dex’s concern. Not really.

What was his concern, however, was his boyfriend’s choice of pajamas as he sprawled in the easy chair, legs draped over the arm, Dex had been there when Whiskey dug through his dresser trying to find a pair of sweatpants only to find a pair of running shorts left clean. And shorts was the perfect description for them, because damn, they showed off a ton of thigh-leg. Dex meant they showed off his legs.

He felt his face flame at his Freudian slip.

Whiskey also sported the biggest grin Dex had ever seen on him. He looked almost blissful, and Dex hadn’t seen him drink nearly enough to be schwasted so…

“Hey, Shits… those brownies?”

At the mention of his name, Shitty turned his head towards Dex from where he lay stretched out on the floor, thankfully in underwear at least. “Why William Poindexter, have you finally embraced your curious side? Alas, my freckled friend, they are gone.”

“I wasn’t asking for one. I was just checking to see if they were one of your specialties.”

Shitty winked. “Yes indeed they were.”

“Uh huh. And…did you make sure to tell Whiskey that before he took one?”

Shitty covered his heart in mock offense. “Why, Dex, you cut me deep. Of course I did. I mean I told his phone which he rea- whatever. The how is not important. He knew, and you know what he said? ‘I’m not a nun, Shitty. I fucking know they’re space cakes. Now, can I have one?’ The way Shitty stroked his mustache in that moment made him look like a supervillain, and the mental image that idea conjured made him chuckle. “Methinks our wee tadpole has tried the good ganja before.”

There was a brief pause in which Whiskey waited for his phone to pick up Shitty’s words. Given the low light, Holster had been quite stern when he said they needed to keep the conversation quiet and speak one at a time. Whiskey had thanked him for remembering, and so here they were. Dex watched the phone’s screen illuminate Whiskey’s face as he read, and then…

He burst out in a fit of giggles. “God, you have no idea how nice this shit makes me feel. It’s like…a PTSD vacation okay? So not my first dance okay? Just my therapist doesn’t want to put me on a regimen of it.” He sighed, climbing off the chair where he crawled across the floor towards Shitty. “So, you magical mustachioed man, like next time you visit? Bring me a treat?” He waggled his eyebrows at him and flopped onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. “You know there’s like a water stain on the ceiling right? Looks like a giant crab attacking a giraffe,” he spluttered, smacking Shitty in the chest as he tried to point it out. Shitty responded by giving him a thumbs up.

“Like… why do giraffe’s have black tongues? Fucking weird. One licks me in the face once at the Bronx zoo. It was…wat.”

This little revelation was apparently hilarious, because Whiskey began to cackle. “Hey! You think we could like steal some of those long-necked fuckers and teach them to ice skate? Bet we could.”

“So we need to get this kid high more often.”

“No! You know what would be even cooler? Tony, Tone-ay, my man, the Toneinator… like get Reda to help us make giraffe astronauts. Giraffeastronauts.” He tilted his head back as far as he could until he was staring at Dex upside. “Holy hallucination, Batman. Who are you? And where have you been hiding?”

Um what? Before Dex could respond, Whiskey rolled over and crawled over to him, where he promptly straddled his lap and faced him. With scorching hands, he cupped Dex’s chin. “Fuck me against a wall; you are gorgeous! Like damn.”

All the blood seemed to rush to Dex’s cheeks, and this time he knew it wasn’t the booze. He brought his hand to his chin and made the sign for thank you.
“Did they tell you I’m an artist? Cause I’d love to draw you like one of your French girls.”

Whiskey leaned in close to Dex’s ear, “But instead of that gaudy necklace you should wear a tie. Only a tie.”

How the hell was Dex supposed to adjust himself in his shorts without Whiskey noticing? Because while he’d totally like to just drag him upstairs and give him exactly what he wanted… Dex wasn’t sure that Whiskey really wanted anything he was saying right now. So, he pulled out his phone and swiped his finger across the screen of his note app.

*I would absolutely be down for all of that, but ask me again when you’re not high as a kite.*

He turned the screen around so Whiskey could read it.

“Mmm,” Whiskey purred at him, “hot and chivalrous. Be still my pansexual heart.” He scooched forward, drawing a soft groan from Dex as he settled over the tent in his shorts. Then, he began to pet Dex’s face. “So very, very pretty.” He tapped his finger on the freckles dotting Dex’s nose. “Like you’ve been sprinkled with angel glitter.”

He plucked the phone from Dex’s hand and wrote out a message himself.

*You… can I like keep you?*

They were close enough like this that Dex was sure Whiskey would be able to see his signs.

*Only if I can keep you, too.*
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I can’t believe it took me over a month to write this chapter. Two reasons, lack of computer time (and I am rubbish at pen and paper. The tactile sensation of the keys as I type like...drives my creativity or something. I don’t know) and lack of motivation. That combined for a real struggle. Anyway, I hope this chapter is worth the wait. I had intended to make art for the first scene which I may still do, but it will have to be added later.

Content warning: Scene five contains some racist and ableist speech which Whiskey himself addresses and calls out. *Wipes away tear* Our angry guy is growing up.

Track Listing:

Scene 1: “Hot Blood”-Kaleo
Scene 2: “Red House”- Buddy Guy
Scene 5: “Unsteady”- X Ambassadors

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Dex shifted on Whiskey’s bed for at least the fifteenth time in five minutes. Why did he agree to this? Why oh why did he, in a moment of high self-esteem induced weakness, say yes to this silly idea?

Oh yes, because Whiskey was pretty much sitting on his dick, high as a- you know what? It didn’t matter why. The point was this was torture.

“Stop moving, Guilhermino,” Whiskey grumbled without looking up from his lap easel. How in the Hell did he know-”

“Because every time you move the shadows the lamp is giving off change the way they look on the paper, that’s how.”

Dex grabbed a nubbly bouncy ball off Whiskey’s nightstand and threw it towards him, making sure it bounced off the floor and did not hit him at all. He would not be the catalyst for sending Whiskey into a panic attack. No way. No how.

“Hmm?” Only after Whiskey finished inking a line with his Micron did he look up.

That’s creepy as Hell sometimes, how you can know what’s going on without looking or being able to hear movement. You know that? Creepy as Hell.

Whiskey rolled his eyes at him, fineliner held firmly between his teeth. What can I say, babe? I have many gifts. He winked. Now could you please stop changing position?

Heat rose to Dex’s face. But, like I know I said I would, but why do I have to be naked?

Whiskey set down his drawing board and crossed the short distance separating them. Then, he leaned across the bed and kissed Dex on the forehead. “Relax. I promise, with the way I positioned the sheet, no one can see your junk. Their loss, frankly.”

Somehow, that did little to assuage his nerves.

“Besides, the assignment was to create a finished art featuring a live, nude model. Just about all of my classmates went to one of the group sessions and will all be turning in art of the same model. Think of it this way, you get the benefit of being drawn from the perspective of someone who cares for you deeply. So, in a way, you will look even better than you normally do, because you’re a fantastic muse. And also...you love me. That’s why you agreed to this. Now, stop moving.”

“He promised to be nice,” Dex muttered.

Whiskey went back to work, first sketching out in pencil, before going in with ink. From what he’d told Dex, the instructor gave up trying to get him to use charcoal only after the third assignment. He had a well-defined style and had no intentions of changing it. So long as the work was quality, what did it matter? Dex admitted that he had a point.

Careful not to move to much, he settled down into the pillows that propped up the arm behind his head.

“You look good, Will. Stop worrying that you don’t. I’m almost done with the line art, and then I will show you.”

As the drawing pencil took the Micron’s place between Whiskey’s teeth, Dex wished, not for the first time, that he too, had artistic talent. It sure would feel nice to be able to draw Whiskey the way he saw him. So Dex tried his best to remain as still as possible for as long as possible.
He thought he had actually done well, that is until Whiskey pulled out his phone and took a picture. Oh God. Dex had moved so much that Whiskey had given up on the idea of using a live model for the entire art and just took snapshots from which he could draw. *I knew this was a bad idea.*

Before flopping onto his stomach to groan loudly into the mattress, Dex sighed and scrubbed both hands down his face. Less than a minute of wallowing into a pit of self-loathing, he felt the mattress dip beside him and soon, a heavy weight settled on his hips.

He found himself pressed further into the mattress as Whiskey leaned down, draping his body over Dex’s back, his lips a hair’s breadth from the shell of Dex’s ear. “Relax; you’re too tense,” he cooed as he walked his fingers up and down Dex’s spine. “You were great.”

Dex turned his head to look over his shoulder at him, his brows furrowed, eyes wary.

Whiskey drew an ‘x’ across the left side of his chest. “Cross my heart, Will. Hands down, my favorite model.”

Unconvinced, Dex wriggled under Whiskey’s weight until he’d given himself just enough room to roll over. *If I did so “great,” why did you need to take a picture? It’s okay. You can tell me the truth. I moved too much for you to finish sketching from life and will draw the rest from photo reference.*

Whiskey folded his arms across his chest, a cocky smirk tugging at the corner of his lips. “I’m done with the outline. I only took the picture for color and lighting reference. Well, the first picture anyway. The second...well now, let’s just say I plan to save that picture for when I’m feeling lonely over the summer.”

There it was again, that infuriating smirk. For a guy as quiet as Whiskey was, he sure knew how to flirt. It was a fascinating dichotomy if you asked Dex. That, however, was beside the point.

The point being the veritable slideshow of dirty images flashing through Dex’s mind in that instant- Images of those large, gorgeous hands wrapped Whiskey’s equally large and gorgeous cock as he stroked himself while staring at that photo.

“Ah now he gets it.” There was a hint of a chuckle in Whiskey’s voice, and when had he grabbed a marker. “Now, if you would please roll over.”

The tip of the Crayola marker was chilly as Whiskey dragged it across Dex’s skin. Short, choppy lines follow long, smooth lines, and every so often he heard the tell-tale click of Whiskey recapping a marker before changing colors. This was not the first time since Whiskey had drawn the sign for ‘I love you’ on his chest that Dex had let him scrawl all over him. No, they were pros at this now, each of them enjoying it for vastly different reasons. Whiskey confessed that he loved using Dex as a canvas because of the trust it required from both of them, Dex trusting that Whiskey wouldn’t draw something juvenile or obscene on him, and Whiskey for letting someone display his art so openly. Dex, however…

“You look so pretty right now, Gui. I’d ask if you wanted me to draw on your chest, but you and I both know that once you turn over, there will be no more drawing. Mmm all in good time.”

The tips of Dex’s ears flamed, because well, Whiskey was right, and just the timbre of his voice lowered in register—on purpose likely—mixed with that tickling sensation of a felt tip dragging against his back had him wriggling on the bed as he tried to adjust his erection.

“There you are, one pair of glamorous rainbow wings,” Whiskey said, placing his phone in front of Dex’s face to show off his finished results.

Dex smiled at him, his arms pinned at his sides, and spoke slowly, “They look great.”

“Mmmhm. You’re looking a bit flushed there, babe. Gotta say, I never would have pegged you for someone with a body canvas kink.”

Dex arched his back in an attempt to buck Whiskey off him, and it seemed that was precisely what Whiskey wanted, because he rolled off at the slightest movement. Once free, Dex sat up. *Yeah me neither. Now... He wagged his eyebrows and flashed him an impish grin. You gonna put your money where your mouth is?*

“No. I’m gonna put my mouth on you.” Whiskey tugged his shirt off over his head and flung it across the room.

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Out the window, the scenery of New Hampshire passed in a blur, trees just beginning to bud in the springtime. Rafa stretched his arms out in front of him to work out the kinks of sitting three hours of driving without stopping. Well three hours of Will driving. Before college, Rafa could count on one hand the number of times he’d been in a car that wasn’t a taxi. So, as he sat in the passenger seat of Will’s beat up truck, he relished in the lack of offensive smells.

Honestly, there was only so much public works employees could do to rid subway trains of that faint smell of urine that seemed ubiquitous. Truly, they had a job he didn’t envy. Heroes- all of them.

He looked over at Will as he drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, head bobbing in time,
lips moving to music playing from his phone no doubt. The radio in the truck, Will explained, had crapped out soon after he bought the thing. Best three hundred dollars he’d ever spent, he said.

“What are you singing?”

Will stole a brief glance at him, his eyes dutifully trained on the road. With one hand, he fingerspelled the song title. It was the best he could do and still keep one hand on the wheel. It frustrated Rafa, but safety first he guessed. Ending up in the hospital because Will crashed the vehicle was not the way either of them wanted to spend their spring break Rafa supposed.

“I don’t know that one. Can I...can I do something?”

Will gave him a small nod, and Rafa reached across the cab and rested his hand on the side of Will’s neck as he sang. With each word’s vibrations buzzing through Will’s neck, Rafa tried to pretend he could figure out what the song might sound like. It was futile of course, but it felt nice anyway.

If he was being honest, given what Will had told him about his extended family, Rafa didn’t hold high expectations for the week in Maine. Will promised that he would step in and make sure they treated Rafa great, assured him that his immediate family would, of course love him- well maybe not Libby, but she was fifteen, Will said, and she hated everyone right now.

So, rather than let his anxiety simmer--or more accurately fester--Rafa focused on Will’s singing and how carefree his face got when he enjoyed a piece of music. “What’s this one?”

R-E-D  H-O-U-S-E

A quick check on Google filled in the rest. “The one by Hendrix?”

Will shook his head.

B-U-D-D-Y  G-U-Y

Rafa grabbed Will’s phone. “May I?” Another nod. As Rafa scrolled through his streaming service, courtesy of a share Spotify account with Derek, he found himself intrigued.

“Curious...why in the Hell do the rest of the guys call your musical tastes ‘Dad Rock’? All your downloaded playlists are blues or roots rock. That’s not really dad music.”

To his surprise, Will pulled the car off the road and onto the shoulder before he put it into park.

“What.”

Will turned and gave Rafa his whole attention. They like to tease me, because I mean look at me. I am the whitest of white guys at first glance. I come from a family of conservatives, but like I explained before, it’s more from a financial standpoint. Yeah taxes funding social programs are great, but when given the choice between lower taxes on each paycheck with more money in your pocket right now or paying more now and seeing the benefit later, low income people are gonna have a hard time picking the latter. Well, that’s how my parents view it anyway. The extended family, yeah they’re those type of White Republicans. But not every person with conservative politics- oh God. I sound like one of those whiny men who have to counter the ‘Yes, all women’ with ‘Not all men.’

So, why do you enjoy the blues?

So anyway, of course, of course I would be a fan of Dad Rock. Not like any of them bothered to ask me what music I liked. You know how many blues classics talk about growing up poor? A lot. And yeah, they’re talking about the black experience and being poor. I will never be able to relate to the first half of that idea, but the second sure resonates with me. The guitar work is amazing too, and a lot of unique and fantastic voices.

Rather than say a word, because he didn’t have a sufficient rebuttal, Rafa slid across the bench seat and kissed him like his life depended on it. At first, Will seemed shocked, his body rigid, but it didn’t take him long to melt into it.

When he felt his stomach rumble, no doubt audibly, he pulled back and laughed, “Sorry.”

I know a place that has great burgers not too far from here. It’s this little dive restaurant, but the food is amazing.

Sounds good.

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Dex doubled over with laughter as Hannah crashed into Whiskey’s legs at full force. Then, he proceeded to melt into a puddle of goo right there on the kitchen floor when the pair of them began signing at each other.

Ninja Turtle! I missed you!

Whiskey broke out in a full dimpled smile that lit up his whole face. Nice to see you again, Ladybug, I hear you had a birthday last month.
I did. I’m six now, practically a grown up.

Whiskey knelt down so that he was eye-to-eye with her. I don’t know about that, but, hey. I got you a present.

Dex was not aware that he’d had bought Hannah anything. From his messenger bag, Whiskey pulled a slim wrapped gift that Hannah wasted no time in ripping open.

Wow! I love books. I’m not good at reading yet, though.

Give it time. But my grandma gave me this book when I was little. I was too old for it back then, but it was nice to read a story about someone like me. Would you like me to read it to you?

Hannah didn’t respond, but rather dragged Whiskey out of the kitchen and into the living room before he could even blink. On his way out of the room, Whiskey shrugged and said, “I’m glad she likes it.”

Then, Dex continued his liquefying descent into the floor, as he followed, then watched Hannah crawl into Whiskey’s lap.

‘Lee was a piano man.’

“That is so cute.”

Startled out of his trance, Dex looked over to see his sister, Libby looking at the scene from the front door. “Hey, Libby.”

“Hannah get a new tutor? A hot one?”

“No. That’s Rafa, my b-week teammate from school.”

“One, you’re fifteen and that would be illegal, and two, Rafa’s not single.” He tried not to grind his teeth in irritation; he wasn’t sure if he was successful.

“Oh come on. He’s a freshman right? Cause I don’t remember you ever mentioning him before this year. So he’s what, eighteen?”

“He’s six months younger than me, which is way too old for you, and like I said. He's not single.”

“Killjoy.”

***

Rafa dug through his back, mind racing and frantic. Oh no, not again! I can’t do this here. The more he dug and couldn’t find what he’d been seeking, the more he began to unravel. His blood boiled, and he found himself in desperate need of a heavy bag upon which to work out his aggression. A tap on his shoulder startled him, and he snapped, “What the fuck do you want?”

Will flinched at his words, and Rafa’s stomach dropped. However, before he could apologize, Will held up a hand to stop him, and then opened his arms in invitation, one Rafa didn’t dare refuse.

When he’d reined in his anger, Rafa stepped back, fully aware his features had twisted in contrition.

No need to apologize, Rafa. I listened when you said sometimes you can’t help it when you have anger outbursts like that. Look, you didn’t hurt me; just shouted at me.

But, Rafa scratched his brow before continuing. It forced him to compose himself before continuing. It’s not your fault. So yes, I do need to apologize. It makes me feel less shit about it. Let me. Okay? I’m sorry, Gui.

Thank you. I forgive you. What are you looking for?

My medication. I know I packed it.

I know you did too. I saw you toss them into your duffel. Which one are you missing?

“All of them!” He took a shuddering breath. I can manage not having one of them, but being without every one for a week is a recipe for disaster, Will! You saw me at one night, one night without my Minipress. And that's just for nightmares. If you want to see a full on rage attack, take away my mood stabilizer! I don’t ever want you to see me like that. I’m sure you will, but not here. Not when I’m supposed to impress people.

Will shook his head. Tartaruguinha, you don’t need to impress anyone for me.

It’s self-imposed. I want your family to like me.
Will cradled his face with both hands, making it impossible for him to look away. ‘Breathe,’ he mouthed. *Did you unpack them when we got here?*

Yes, but they were in my medication bag. It was right here on the dresser.

He watched as Will scrolled through his phone, scowl deepening on his face. *Did you happen to have your benzo with you?*

Rafa nodded. *Just in case, you know?*

FIGURED AS MUCH. COME ON. I HAVE A DAMN GOOD IDEA WHERE YOUR MEDICATION WENT.

***

Dex grabbed a skillet from the dish drainer and a wooden spoon from by the stove. He made sure to bang it good and loud. “Family meeting! I don’t care what you’re doing, if you’re here and above the age of six get your ass in the living room!” he spared a glance over at Whiskey where he stood, leaning against the wall.

If he tried hard, Dex swore he’d be able to see smoke coming from his ears. As it was, Whiskey continued to ball his hands into fists and releasing them. As a solidarity measure, he crossed the room to stand beside him, not as close as he would like, oh no. He’d rather have his arm around those shoulders and be running his thumb in a comforting movement along his jaw, but such was life.

Dex had intended only to alert the family that someone had stolen Whiskey’s meds and he’d like them put back right now, but when Dom and Dario walked in, eyes a bit glazed with dopey grins on their faces, he almost lost it. Yep, his suspicions were spot-on. Still, he took a deep breath. *Diplomacy. Go for diplomacy.*

He pointed to his dad. *Interpret for me?*

When his dad gave him the thumbs up, he was about to speak, but was stopped when his cousin opened his big mouth first.

“Yo, Billy, family meeting? Who the Hell actually has those? Why are we here? Better yet, why is your friend here for a family meeting?”

“Yes, thank you. Again for all those who didn’t hear me all the other times I said it, don’t call me Billy. Why are you here, Pasca? Why are you always here. You don’t live here and have your own place last I checked.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Irrelevant. Family meeting because *somebody* here,” he said, gesturing about the room, “thought it would be cute, or acceptable in any way, to go through Rafa’s things and misappropriate his medication. Do I even need to explain why? Frankly, I can’t believe I need to have this conversation. But whoever it was is going to go put them back right now, and no pills better be missing, or I’m gonna be seriously pissed off.”

“Oh come on. Lighten up, Billy—”

“For the last time, stop calling me that! Put his meds back now. That is all I’m gonna say about that.”

“Like he even needs the Xanax, pro—”

“Ding, ding, ding. We have a winner. Give them back, Dario—”

“Yeah,” Whiskey started, “prescription last filled in November with only two pills taken. Did the math on that one did you? Figured that meant I don’t need them? The point of having them, as the label indicates, is to have them around when I need them, which is unpredictable. That’s not a medication you take every day. You do that, and you will become dependent, which obviously you would know, if it was *your* medication! I’m not even mad about that one being missing so much. It’s all the others. Do you even know what topiramate is used for? It’s most commonly used for epilepsy.”

“You have epilepsy?” Libby asked.

Dex watched Whiskey looked over at his dad who signed her question.

“No, but he—” he violently pointed at Dario. “didn’t know that!”

When Dex heard his cousins joking and throwing out slurs like it was nothing because Whiskey couldn’t hear them, his blood pressure skyrocketed (or it sure felt like it). He prepared to go to battle on his behalf.

“Will, did I read that right? Did he just call me a ‘retarded spick’?”

He looked over at Whiskey and nodded.

Whiskey shot daggers at Dom. “What was the rest of what he said, Will?”

Dex couldn’t bring himself to interpret the rest, only managed to sign out—*Please don’t ask me to sign what he said. I don’t want you reading those words on my hands, Rafa. Whiskey*
seemed to understand his reluctance and patted him on the shoulder. His dad, however, did what he couldn’t and interpreted the remainder of Dom’s words. Beside Dex, Whiskey’s whole posture changed from simmering anger to confrontational.

“I’m not Mexican; my family is Brazilian. I was born in New York, as were my mother, and my grandmother. I speak English just fine. I’m deaf not stupid! And even if everything you said were true, it still gives you no right to steal my medication and call me that!”

“It’s not my fault you guys all look the same.”

Whiskey scoffed. “You didn’t. Tell me he didn’t just say we all look the same, Will.”

With a sigh, Dex turned to him and said, “He did,” with a nod.

“Unbelievable. I don’t even have the energy to explain the Latino diaspora to you.” Whiskey took a deep breath. “Would you, I don’t know, have the balls to go and steal a combat veteran’s PTSD meds?” When Dom and Dario shook their heads, Whiskey let out an uncomfortable chuckle. “But somehow it’s okay to take mine. Yeah, new flash, asshole, that’s what those prescriptions are for. Only instead of an enemy soldier trying to kill me, it was my own father. So give me back my medications or I’m calling the cops. That wouldn’t go well for you, because one of you is in possession of a controlled substance that has not been prescribed to you.”

Without saying another word, Whiskey turned and stormed out of the room.

“I can’t believe you!” Dex’s blood boiled. “Why would you do that? I know your parents taught you that stealing is wrong, and that you do not treat guests that way!” He didn’t care much for Uncle Frankie and Aunt Rosalia, but he knew neither of them would condone their sons’ behaviors.

“Why did you even invite him, Bi- Will?”

“Cause he’d be bored as Hell in his apartment alone for a week. It’s called being a good friend.”

In reality, he’d invited him to properly introduce Whiskey to his parents as his boyfriend, and because Vovó D was in Florida for some kind of nursing conference. That, however, was neither here nor there.

“Aw that’s cute. Taking care of your little boyfriend like that.”

Dex froze and silently prayed that his internal panic didn’t show on his face. How- He’d been so careful.

“Don’t look so pissed, Will,” Dario laughed. “It was just a joke.”

“That’s not funny.” Before his face could betray him, he turned an about face and went to find Whiskey.

When he walked into his room, Dex would have been lying if he said he was surprised to find Whiskey packing up his things. He made his approach as conspicuous as possible, standing beside him to help him fold up his clothes. He handed a pair of jeans to him.

I’m sorry.

No, no. You were- I’m proud of you. Thank you for standing up for me. That couldn’t have been easy for you.

Dex shrugged. Actually? It was. I am so mad at them. You shouldn’t have had to deal with any of that. I was apologizing though, for not wanting to tell you what they said. That was wrong of me. Part of interpreting is giving you the full context of what was said, and I just...I couldn’t.

Whiskey reached over and stilled his hands. “I understand why you couldn’t. I wouldn’t have wanted to interpret words like that for someone either.” He licked his lips. I can’t stay here though.

Yeah I know. I’ll ask my uncle for money to put you or both of us in a hotel for the night, and I’ll drive us back to school in the morning. I’m sure he’ll do it, since it was his damn sons who put you in this position.

You don’t have to do that. I’m sure I can cover a night at Motel 6.

But you shouldn’t have to pay a dime. This was someone being a bad host. That’s on them. Dex wrapped his arms around Whiskey’s waist, pulling him close. His nerves had only begun to calm down, and he still shook with anger, but the feeling of Whiskey’s forehead pressed to his had such soothing qualities that he didn’t register the sound of a knock on his door until it opened.

There was no way he could talk his way out of their embrace to Diana who stood in the doorway holding Whiskey’s medication bag. However, before Dex could spiral into panic, she simply reached behind her, softly closing the door. Then, she handed Whiskey his bag.

Easy there, Will. It’s okay. Breathe. This, she gestured between him and Whiskey, is okay. I accept you.

Dex released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He could feel hot tears prickle the corners of his eyes. “Really?”
“Yeah. Without a doubt.”

Thank you for bringing these back to me. Whiskey stowed the bag safely in his duffel.

I think they should have been adult enough to bring them back to you themselves, but here we are. I counted the rest of them for you, and it seems like only two Xanax were missing. Everything else seems to have what I think is the right amount.

Whiskey gave her a small, tight-lipped smile.

But, um, you know what? I was about to head home, and it's not much, but I have an air mattress. Nothing fancy, but it will fit you both. If you want a safe place to stay. That you can always use anytime, Will. Anytime.

Dex wraped her in a hug. "Thank you," he mumbled into her shoulder.

"Of course. You're my baby brother. I gotta take care of you. And don't worry about Marcy," she said of her roommate, "her moms are lesbians. She'll be nice to you, too." When she went to sign her words for Whiskey, he stopped her.

"You don't need to. Your words were meant for Will. If it doesn't pertain to me, or involve me, you don't have to interpret. I understand."

Instead, of speaking further, she helped them finish packing. However, she did bump his shoulder to get his attention several minutes later.

"What?"

"You did good," she whispered, "he's cute. Like really seriously good looking."

"I know right?" He tapped Whiskey's arm.

Yeah?

She says you're cute.

Oh dear Lord, that bashful blush and shy smile on Whiskey's face. It did things to him. Okay? Fantastic things.

Come on. He squeezed Whiskey's shoulder on the way out the bedroom door. There would be time for hand holding later- and the rest of the week.

Chapter End Notes

The book Whiskey reads to Hannah is *The Deaf Musicians* by Pete Seeger, Paul DuBois Jacobs, and R. Gregory Christie. And it's a really cute book, which I recommend.
Chapter Notes

Track Listing:

Scene 1: “Bodies” - Drowning Pool
“Immortals” - Fall Out Boy
Scene 4: “On Top of the World” - Imagine Dragons
Scene 5 - end: “Lovely Day” - Bill Withers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dex reached around Whiskey’s shoulders to pull him back from the Harrisburg University forward. This game was turning into a fucking train wreck. Scratch that. It had been one ever since three minutes into the second period when Bitty scored on a sweet saucer pass from Ransom. A handful of hateful words were spat at Bitty, which drew penalties from Holster and Ransom coming to his defense. It had only grown worse from there. As it stood, the score was knotted up two goals apiece, and he prayed that the game didn’t go into overtime, because he honestly worried about someone losing their head.

He squeezed Whiskey’s arm just under his shoulder pads before dragging him out of the fray. Instead of trying to calm him with signed words, Dex just gave him a look, one that said, ‘Hey, be careful. We need you.’ For the time being, it seemed to work, because Whiskey skated away and back to the bench.

Once there, Dex tried to figure out what had set him off in the first place.

I didn’t see what Briscoe did to you. What happened?

Fucker cracked his stick across my left wrist. Should have been slashing. I had already passed the puck to Tony. The hit was intentional, aiming for injury.

Yeah. Fuck, I hate playing the Hellbenders. Bunch of goons, the lot of them. You okay?

Whiskey showed him his wrist, demonstrating his range of motion. “Yeah. Got more of my elbow pad than he was hoping to, I think.”

What do you say we make him pay for it?

Sounds like a plan.

They shuffled down the bench as the next line took their shifts. Easier said than fucking done. Their goalie was basically Gigantor in goaltender form. Dex had looked him up, and Dan Smallwood was massive. Seriously, six foot seven and 255. What was left of the net to shoot at? Not much. And yet they’d managed to score two on the guy. Maybe there was hope after all.

With five minutes now left in the third period, Dex stared out at the ice, itching to get back out there. Ransom came in for a change, but Holster was still tied up in the corner battling for a puck. Dex looked down the bench at Nursey who still waited for Ryan, the team equipment manager, to return with his left skate. Guess it was his shift to take instead.

Dex hurried across the ice to help out his fellow defenseman. God, he did not want to go to overtime against this damn team. Finally, Holster found enough breathing room to clear the puck. Unfortunately it ricocheted off the glass and out of play, signalling a face-off in Samwell’s end.

With an outstretched arm, the official held the puck read to drop it when Ollie began to battle too early and found himself tossed from the circle. Dex was, admittedly, not the best face-off guy on the team. No, that honor belonged to Ollie, and now that he wasn’t taking the drop, Dex was fairly certain Harrisburg would when the draw.

When the puck slid back to a Hellbender defensemen, Dex winced at his jinxing of the play. Just had to think negative thoughts didn’t you, William?

A blistering shot from Harrisburg’s left defensemen, Nico Campanella, dinged off the pipe and sailed into the corner. Holster skated after it while Dex watched as the whole scene slowed to molasses pace around him. His brother liked to say he watched things happen in slow motion when he knew he wouldn’t be able to do a damn thing. Once, Dex had tripped over the loose rug in Uncle Frankie’s game room only to faceplant, earning him five stitches above his brow. Henry had confessed that moment, from where he watched the scene unfold across the room, had been one of those times. He’d wanted to help but couldn’t move fast enough; it was as though he trudged through quicksand at the time.

Now happened to be another such moment, as Dex stared, frozen in place when Harrisburg’s centerman, Pommelaard took half a dozen full speed strides towards Holster in the corner. With his back turned, there was no way Holster could know what was coming. Dex could only hope Holster’s chest hit the boards rather than his head.

Neither happened, however, because Holster turned to move the puck up the ice, skating about five feet from the boards when Pommelaard collided with him. As big as he was, Holster didn’t
stand a chance. The fucking goon dropped his shoulder at the last second, hitting Holster in the gut. He crumpled over Pommelaard’s shoulder. His feet slid out from under him, and he careened into the boards feet first. Though the arena’s raucous fans drowned out most noise, Dex could hear the unmistakable crack of a broken bone from twenty feet away.

Within seconds, the ref blew his whistle, but Dex had already shaken himself out of his daze and rushed over to Holster.

“Shit! Fuck! Shit,” Holster screamed, tears of agony welling up in his eyes as he grabbed his left leg. “Fucking hell, Dex. My leg!”

“Yeah, I heard the crack. How’s your head?”

“Didn’t hit my head.”

“Well that’s good.” Dex turned to wave for the team trainers. What he found instead was a brawl behind him. He took off his gloves so he could help Holster roll onto his side, get the weight off his left leg, eliciting a scream of pain from him. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Son of a.” As Dex removed his helmet for him, Holster looked over at their fighting teammates. “Looks like your boy is going to town on Pommelhard.”

“What?” Sure enough, Whiskey’s gloves lay on the ice, and he had Pommelaard by the jersey. Despite the fact the guy had a good five inches and at least twenty pounds on Whiskey, he landed several good blows. Then-oh crap. Ransom stormed off the bench to have a go at the guy. Instead, he met Campanella first. As he tried to push past the guy, who seemed only interested in holding him back from joining the fray, Ransom just decided to have a go at him. And well, that just turned everything into chaos.

“What did you just fucking call me?” Whiskey shouted as he knocked Pommelaard to the ice.

Oh shit.

“My mom was not a crack whore!” Whiskey got two more good jabs in, bloodying Pommelaard’s nose. Wow. He managed to read that on the guy’s lips despite the high adrenaline situation? Impressive. It took three officials to pull Whiskey off before they ejected him, but not before Pommelaard came up with another insult to throw Whiskey’s way. “Oh yeah? Buy a pair of tweezers, Scorsese!”

Before Dex could even process what else was going on, more players joined in. Wicky quickly came to his captains’ defenses. Bitty, simply, and rightly so, skated away from the scrum, knowing full well every guy on Harrisburg’s team had at least six inches on him and fifty pounds. Instead, he joined Chowder at the net. You see that? That is why Bitty would have Dex’s vote for captain next year. Hands down. Showing restraint and leadership in a tough situation. Tango just looked confused.

All the chaos around him made it feel like ages for Dex, but as he soon learned from the medical staff that showed up moments later, it had been maybe a minute. Two tops. They’d made it to Holster as soon as it was safe to do so.

Dex backed away to give them some room, making his way to Bitty.

“I saw that hit. He went into the boards hard. How is he?”

“Pretty sure he broke something. I heard it.”

Bitty shuddered. “At least it’s the last game of the season. You think it will hinder his chances with the Schooners next season?”

“So long as it heals okay and it’s not like his knee or ankle, should be good.”

The fight began to clear, and the head official skated to center ice to announce the penalties.

“Number 33 Harrisburg: Five minutes for Charging, Two for Unsportsmanlike Conduct, and Game disqualification for Fighting. Number 17 Harrisburg: Two minutes for Not clearing area of fight and Game disqualification for Fighting. Number 5 Harrisburg: Two minutes for Roughing and two minutes for Instigating. Number 21 Samwell: Two for Unsportsmanlike Conduct, Two for Instigating, and Game disqualification for Fighting. Number 11 Samwell: Two minutes for Instigating and Game disqualification for Leaving the Bench and Fighting. Number 8 Samwell: Two minutes for Roughing and two minutes for Taunting.”

Yikes.

Dex watched Ransom and Whiskey fist bump on their way off the ice. He didn’t fail to notice them hovering in the tunnel just out of sight of the officials. No doubt they were trying to stay close to the ice and check on Holster.

Medical staff motioned for both Dex and Ollie to support Holster’s weight once they had him up off the ice. “Hey Ollie, what’d Wicky say to get a taunting penalty? I want, nay need, to know this epic chirp.”

Ollie burst out laughing. “You’re gonna love this one. He said ‘What are ya’ gonna do, Happy Camper, bleed on me?’ That seemed to be enough.”


“Dexy,” Holster whined, “do you think this will get me pity sex tonight?”
“Like you needed pity sex. You three are ahem...active.”

“No need to sugarcoat, Poindexter,” he panted through the pain as the small rise of the step off
the ice jostled his injured leg. “Sex is fantastic with those two, but a bigger bed would be so much
better. Too bad we’re in Tampa and March is back at Samwell.”

They passed Ransom and Whiskey in the tunnel who took over for Ollie and him. Holster lolled
his head over onto Ransom’s shoulder.

“Fucker broke my leg, Ransy.”

“You serious?”

“Like a heart attack, babe. Felt the snap.” He groaned again. “Worst pain of my life.”
Ransom turned and kissed his temple. “Don’t worry, I’ll take good care of you.”

Delirious with pain, Holster sighed. “Hell yeah, pity blowjob!”

Mack groaned at their banter. “Okay, that’s enough, guys. Save the pillow talk for the bedroom.”

Eager to get Holster back to the exam room, Mack rushed them along. Dex would have wait to
check on Whiskey.

Finally, the officials signalled for a face-off at center ice. About damn time. Fuck, they only had
two minutes left in the game. Why couldn’t everyone just keep it together? Still, Dex was pissed at
the dirty hit on his captain and just as infuriated about whatever the hell that goon said to Whiskey
to rile him up like that.

With the shortened bench, everyone would be pulling double shifts until the end of regulation.
For overtime, if it came to that, Murray and Hall would have to mix up their lines. Since they were
down an entire line of defensemen, coaches split up him and Nursey. Bitty found himself moved
to center, flanked by Tango and Malczewski.

“Breathe,” Dex said to his new D-partner, Pedroza. The frog looked so nervous he could puke.
“Vous’ve had several shifts already tonight.”

“Yeah, I know. Just. Man, what if I screw up?”

Dex clapped him on the back. “Relax, Cammer. You’ll do fine.”

“Sure hope so.”

Bitty won the draw, sending it back to Dex, who moved it up the ice. From his spot at the blue
line, he bought his time. This was crunch time; he knew that. He sent a wicked wrister towards
Smallwood. Though it caught him off-guard, he deflected it with his blocker, up and out of play.
One of the Hellbender forwards decided it was a fine time to bump into him on his way to the
face-off circle.

“Watch where you’re going! It’s called skating, Gingervitis.”

“That’s the best you could come up with, Snot Otter? There are vacuums that suck worse than
you do.” Dex shook his head and took his place. Though the arena roared around them, he
managed to tune it all out almost to the point where all he could hear was his breath.

Inhale. Exhale. Inha- Puck drop.

Coming in for Bitty, Ollie didn’t win the face-off. Harrisburg’s center passed it back to his
defense. They cycled the puck for a while. It was almost as though they just wanted to eat up the
clock. Well fuck that.

The disembodied voice of the announcer came through the loudspeaker. “Last minute of play in
regulation.”

Tango intercepted a pass, but his quick snap shot went wide, and Harrisburg regained possession.
Again with the keep away. Play to win dipshits. Not play for overtime! Harrisburg ignored his
silent plea. Not that it mattered any because they fumbled their attempt to clear the zone. Failed,
and sent the puck right to the blade of Dex’s stick.

26-25-24-23-22-21

He had no clear shooting lane, so he passed it over to Cammer.

19-18

Rather than cradle the puck and wait, Cammer sent a blistering one-timer hurtling towards
Smallwood that Dex honestly couldn’t believe the kid had in him. A defenseman failed to block
the shot...

15-14

The puck sped over the line right through Smallwood’s legs. Holy shit! Holy shit! As the buzzer
sounded, the cheering he’d been turning out came rushing to him at once. Samwell swarmed
Cammer.

“MC Cammer with the play of the game!” Ollie grinned. “Smallwood can’t touch that!”

On his way off the ice, Dex made sure to get a jab in at the goalie. “Nice save, Little Dick! You
could land a jumbo jet in your five hole. You know you really should work on that,’ he cackled as
he skated to the bench.

The last seconds of the game felt like an eternity, ticking by slower than a damn sloth. Fucking
hell. “Ransy! Can you believe it?”

Dex looked over his shoulder where he found Ransom, Whiskey, and Holster with a fresh pair of
crutches and an open-air cast ready to join their team the moment the final buzzer sounded.

“Five, four, three, two, one!” The Samwell bench erupted in celebration. Nursey almost crushed
poor Chewie in an attempt to get to Dex.

“Oh my God, Dex! We did it.”

Someone crashed into his back. “Bela assistência, Gui!” Whiskey cheered as he hugged him from
behind the moment Dex’s feet hit the ice. “So proud of you!”

Dex was wholly unprepared when Whiskey hopped onto his back for a piggyback skate around
the ice. Lucky he was a great skater, steady and more than sure on his feet. In the middle of the
ice, still swarmed with teammates Cammer looked unsure what to do with all the newfound
attention. Dex clapped him on the back. “Soak it up, Cam. Not every day you get to be hero of the
game!”

“Watch out! Move it! Old man on crutches comin’ through.” How Holster’s booming voice could
cut through such a thunderous din amazed him. Dex wriggled until Whiskey slid off his back and
moved out of the way.

Still pale, no doubt from the pain, Holster hobbled out onto the carpet that had been rolled out for
the trophy presentation. Ransom was stuck like glue to his side, ready to catch him should he slip.

“What’d Mack say?”

“Broken tibia. Clean break though. They have me on some pain meds and have it splinted, but I
gotta head to the ER after the presentation.”

Ransom squeezed his shoulder. “They’ll have you good as new in no time.”

“By no time, you mean three months minimum don’t you?”

“Yeah. That’s exactly what I mean.”

With a dejected sigh, Holster shrugged. “Good thing we didn’t buy those tickets to Hawaii yet,
yeah? Super sucks, I was looking forward to that.”

“Well, you know what? We’ll just have to make it up to you. You know what that means?”

Ransom said, wagging his brows at him.

“Pampering?”

“Oh and then some. March and I are gonna pamper the hell out of you.”

“Yeah? Gonna hold my leg while I shower? Kiss it and make it better.”

Ransom held up his phone, screen facing the pair of them, and Dex struggled to get out of the
way of their selfie. He quickly noticed Ransom had Skype pulled. From what he could see, the
Volleyball house was in a similar state of chaos.

“Wooooooo! You did it boys!”

“Hell yeah we did!” Holster flashed her a pained grin and her elated expression faded a bit.

“And Imma be honest with you, Justin...watching you wail on that guy...major turn on. Like I’d
be all over you right now if I were there right now.”

Holster scowled, “Hey! What about me?”

Her smile was back. “Oh don’t think I’d forget about you. Are you hurting pretty bad right now,
baby? The hit looked brutal.”

“Yeah. Gonna need some TL.C.”

She winked. “I can do that. Oh hey, find Chowder. Cait wants to shower him with affection.”

Holster turned away from the phone, “Yo, Chowder! Get your amazing puck stopping ass over
here and say hi to your girl!”

Dex shook his head, chuckling, as Chowder tore across the ice.

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Noticing a flurry of activity out of the corner of his eye, Rafa looked up from the recipe scrawled
on the back of a Personal Prescription Information printout that Adam got with his Vicodin. How
in the ever loving fuck was he supposed to get his hands on all these types of booze? Why he’d
been trusted to make the tub juice in the first place remained a mystery to him. He suspected it had
to do with two things, both of them Justin and Adam.

Hobbling into the kitchen in a dress shirt and boxer briefs, pair of suit pants draped around his neck, Adam propped his crutches against the table. He shook the pants at Justin who had thrown up his hands in defeat.

“I think you are supposed to wear pants to meetings with agents and NHL team executives,” Rafa said, a smirk tugging on his mouth.

Adam’s face went blank before he tried to demonstrate the crux of his problem. The pants, naturally fit over his right leg just fine, but he failed to fit his left foot through the cuff thanks to the cast. “See?”

“You, sir, are in a bit of a quandary it seems.”

The floor shook as someone came in through the front door. Moments later, Will and Derek appeared in the kitchen carrying two coolers. Derek’s face was full of mischief as he rattled off something.

He said they better appreciate the lengths we went through to sneak all this ice out of the dining hall. And then Ransom asked why Nursey couldn’t just buy ice?

Rafa shook his head and resumed attempting to make sense of the haphazardly notated recipe, until Will tapped him on the shoulder. “Hmm?”

Well, I’m about to tell the team, but I thought you’d like to know first.

Yeah, what is it?

Guess who got invited to the Ranger’s prospect training camp this summer?

“No way! No fucking way!” He crushed Will in a hug. “I’m so proud of you, Gui! You know what? You should totally come stay with me for the summer!”

Will wriggled out of his clutches. Thought you’d be pretty excited about that.

I am. I am so excited, and proud, mostly proud.

Will opened his wallet and took out a five waving it around with a grandiose flourish before he crammed it into the Sin Bin. Then, he fisted both hands in Rafa’s t-shirt and kissed him, no doubt earning a chorus of ‘FOINNNNNNE’ from Justin and Adam.

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“I can’t wear sweats to this damn meeting, Justin! Who do you take me for? Shitty?”

Ransom doubled over with laughter. “Oh God no. Even Shitty wouldn’t wear sweats to a contract meeting. But I said yoga pants. Bro, babe, yoga pants.”

“Pay the jar, Rans. Don’t think Imma let that pet name go.”

Ransom rolled his eyes at him, but paid up nonetheless.

“Have you seen yoga pants anywhere around here that would remotely fit me? No? That’s because I don’t have any!”

Dex opened the fridge and took out an apple, content to munch on it as he watched with a hint of schadenfreude at the scene unfolding before him. Behind him, he could hear Rafa muttering about Holster’s shitty handwriting.

“The fuck is ‘two-buck chuck’, and four bottles? Foda-se essa merda.” He threw his hands up in disgust, then walked over to the liquor cabinet and pulled out four random bottles. Dex didn’t feel like telling him the Grand Marnier was most definitely not two-buck chuck. Then again, he suspected Whiskey knew exactly what he was doing.

“I can’t wear these!”

Dex looked over his shoulder to see Holster holding up a pair of khaki shorts he was sure he’d seen Ransom wear golfing once.

“Oh come on, sweetcheeks. Dudes wear those all the time for outdoor summer weddings.”

Holster finagled himself into the chair, and after a series of failed attempts, managed to lasso his left foot with the cuff of the shorts. His right leg, was obviously much simpler. Dex didn’t even Holster at all. It had to suck being unable to bend your knee at all.

Once he’d tucked the shirt into the waistband and donned the navy blue suit jacket he’d worn to Lardo’s art show the year before, Holster looked down at his body. “I look like a fucking tool, Ransy.”

Ransom handed him one of his Sperry boat shoes. “A hot tool though. Like all those asshole, rich white dudes that I secretly find kind of hot, but would never touch with a twelve foot pole. Three words, Yacht Club Tool.”
Holster frowned. “I… okay I am grumpy. I will give you that, but I am not an asshole.”

“No,” Ransom shook his head before kissing Holster’s cheek and helping him stand, “you’re not. But given the circumstances, I think this is the dressiest you can get for this meeting. I mean the full-leg rainbow cast and painted toenails really make the whole outfit. Here, give me your bag.”

“I can’t believe I let you two paint my toes. I’m down as hell for joining you and March for pedicures, but nail polish doesn’t suit me.”

“Let’s go. March is waiting outside. She thinks you’ll fit better in April’s truck than your van.”

***

Walking into the Haus hand-in-hand with Whiskey, the music thumping and chaos everywhere, Dex took one look at Holster stretched out on the green couch, leg propped up on Chowder’s Sharks floor pillow, and doubled over with laughter.

“Oh my God, dude. What in the Hell are you wearing?” He asked of Holster’s bright green board shorts, unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt, and frayed straw Panama hat get up. Instead of his usual glasses, Holster seemed to be wearing his contacts, because on his face were a pair of rainbow colored shutter shades. Each of his cheeks sported a lipstick kiss print; from what Dex could tell, two different sets of lips. Not that it surprised him any; guy was in a committed relationship with two other people. The two real flower leis around his neck created a nice finishing touch. “You said nothing about this being a theme party. And Shitty would have your head if he knew you threw a luau. He’d called it ‘A piece of appropriative bullshit’ if he were here.”

Holster pointed his clear Solo cup adorned with not one, not two, but three drink trinkets at him. In addition to the standard tub juice drink umbrellas, a pink one, the team usually handed out to each person, there was a lit-up purple star, and a blue mermaid. He’d colored what Dex could only assume was the polyamory pride flag on it with some Sharpies. “This is not a luau. This is a kegster of epic proportions, an homage to the end of the year, and….maybe an early Pride party okay? Pride Month and college schedules don’t ever seem to align. Oh, and if you’re referring to the leis, you should go see Manunui from the V-ball team. She’s walking around with a big ass box of these and will give you one if you ask. They smell amazing.”

Beside him, Whiskey took a step forward, took a closer look at the flowers, and jumped up and down like an excited toddler. “Oh my God! Plumeria! Where…"

You know who Leila Manunui is? Friends with Farmer?

Really pretty. About as tall as you? Black hair?

Yep. Holster said she’s handing them out.

Whiskey kissed his cheek before disappearing into the crowd. “Don’t even say it, Holster. There are no fines at kegsters. So, why the get-up? And why is the couch in here if you’re just going to have to move it into the living room before bed?”

Holster shook an index finger at him. “Oh no. Tomorrow morning, this couch is being moved to the porch. I bought a new couch for the Haus. Fancy ass sleeper sofa. Shall be my legacy to this place. Frogs will say, ‘Wow, that couch is way too nice for a dive like this.’ And then another will say, ‘I hear Birkholtz bought it. Slept on it for a month before graduating.’ Oh, I’m buying you all a proper beer fridge too. Probably. Most likely.”

Wow he was drunk. “How much have you had to drink?”

Holster scowled. “When did you become my mother?” Then, his face lit up in a mischievous grin. “I’m just chirping you, P-Dexy. Since I don’t really get to do anything more than relax here on this health hazard we all know and love, I’m having fun the best way I can. S’all good though. Cause this here kegster is a celebration. You get to train with the Rangers, Whiskey has his artist workshop with DC this summer, and I signed a three year two million dollar contract this afternoon. I am fucking shwasted. It’s awesome. Oh and Rans and March are both wearing makeup tonight.” A dreamy look washed over his face. “S’not fair Dex. They’re all sparkly now, so beautiful I’m gonna die. I can’t handle the two of them looking like glittery angels tonight. I’m only human. Let me live, Dex!”

Dex shook his head, about to chirp Holster for his drunken ramblings until the guy decided to divulge information that would surely cause him some sort of mental anguish for the evening.

“Don’t look at me in that tone of voice, dude. Lardo and her art buddies are doing makeup for anyone that wants it. Anyone. G’head you try and not die if Whiskey, beautiful, perfect eyebrows, and dreamy brown eyes Whiskey gets in line. I guar-un-tee it,” he said, imitating the Cajun accent Dex had heard in those memes.

He waved Holster off and went to find Whiskey. Sure enough, he found him sitting in Lardo’s makeup chair as she applied a shimmering line of hot pink eyeliner to his top lid. His cheeks had already been dusted with a gold dust that gave him an ethereal like a majestic faery.

Whoa there. Stop. He said faery with an ‘ae’ not ‘ai’, mythical spritely beings, not the pejorative for gay men. Just stop.

Whiskey’s eyes lit up when he saw Dex. Holster wasn’t the first to notice their dreaminess. As if
Dex could miss it. Hell, he could lose himself in them for hours, and he had, on several occasions now.

When Lardo finished him up, he popped up out of the chair, quickly removing one of the leis around his neck, and slipped it around Dex’s. Then, he planted his perfectly blue pout on Dex’s cheek. “How do I look?”

Dex wasn’t sure which words would work best. So instead he simply signed Speechless.

“Oh? Good or bad?” Whiskey asked with a smirk.

Two thumbs up. That’s the best Dex could do.

“Excellent. Your turn.” Before he could protest, Whiskey gave his shoulders a gentle shove until he gave in and sat in the makeup chair.

“So, Poindexter. What’ll it be?”

“L...uh...don’t know. I know nothing about makeup, other than my mom and sister’s wear it. Now, I know so much about nail polish and nail art thanks to visiting my mom at work. But makeup? Total mystery.”

Lardo studied him. “First, because we’re all about personal choice here tonight, do you even want makeup on? Whisk didn’t really give you a chance to protest. So?”

Dex shrugged. “Maybe nothing obvious? You know since people post pictures, and I’m not out to a lot of people. You know?”

She seemed to ponder his response for a second before grabbing what looked like crayons and began to color on his face. For all he knew she was making him look like a cat. When she handed him the mirror, he was surprised to find a black superhero mask adorning the upper part of his face.

“Larissa, that looks awesome,” Whiskey cooed. “You make a hot Nightwing, Gui.” He turned Dex’s face side to side to admire her work. “Sweet. It changes colors a bit in different light. How’d you do that?”

Lardo handed him a spray bottle.

“Rainbow colored shimmer spray. Subtle. Come on, Dick. We’re off to dance.”

Dex pulled his hand free from Whiskey’s grasp. Why’d you call me a dick?

Whiskey shook his head with a chuckle.

No. I called you Dick. As in Dick Grayson...the original Robin. AKA Nightwing. Not a dick. THE Dick the one with the hottest ass. Come on. Dance with me.

***

Rafa’s foot slipped on a rock along the trail, and he braced himself for the fall. Said fall, however, didn’t come, because Will caught his arm to stop the stumble. Rather than release him, Will shifted his grasp to his hand, interlocking their fingers as he helped him over the unstable terrain.

“Thanks.”

Gentle pressure on his hand, a light squeeze, was Will’s unspoken way of saying ‘I got you.’

Sunlight filtered in through the leafed canopy above glittering on the forest floor. Every so often, Rafa noticed birds flitting about, squirrels leaping from tree to tree. Never one for hiking, he could count on one hand how many times he’d been in a forest at all. This was nice though; he was enjoying himself.

He took a deep breath, letting the scent of old leaves, dirt, and new vegetation flood his senses. Fresh, clean. He wondered if the forest sounded as good as it looked, as good as it smelled. It probably did. When he was a child, Rafa had always enjoyed the sound of birds outside his bedroom window - well except for those damn pigeons. But come on, how many people enjoyed them at all? Few, he suspected. Admittedly, he did miss the joyful call of songbirds. His memory would have to suffice.

A stick broke beneath his foot, and he guess the sound of it made Will turn around to check on him. “I’m good. Just a stick, Guilhermino.”

Will flashed him a warm grin, and Rafa admired the way the sun made his copper hair glow. The hiking pack he wore looked heavy, but despite Rafa’s offer to carry it off and on with him, Will refused his help. He, himself, had been given the task of carrying both sleeping bags and camping pillows. Somewhere in his pack, Rafa knew where the three logs Will had split to make a star pattern on the top of the log. He’d called them Swedish torches, said used less wood, burned easier and required less watching, all of which meant for him, less weight in his pack.

Though the hike was long, the trail hadn’t been too tricky. It was well marked, decently sloping, and hell, they were both in fantastic shape. Plus, since it had been Will’s idea to go camping in the middle of the week, the two of them had seen few other people around. So though the woods bustled with activity, the afternoon had been serene, sublime even.

They’d both finished their finals the week before, and the dorms didn’t close for the summer for a
week and a half. Rafa would join Will in Portland for a week while he packed for three months in New York. Then, the pair of them would take the train to his place. He was excited, more than excited really. Elated, ecstatic...thrilled? That described his feelings better.

The brilliant yellow hue of a goldfinch rushed across the trail in front of them, and Rafa followed its colors to where it landed on the branch of a beech tree several yards away. Rather than continue on hiking, he set down his pack and pulled his sketchbook from the front pouch. He found a good spot to sit that wouldn’t disturb the bird in its nest.

He hadn’t thought to bring any colored pencils or markers with him, so he jotted down the closest color approximations for him to come back to later. While he sketched, he wondered if the nest contained eggs, and if it did, how many. Leaves shifted beside him as Will sat down to watch him draw.

Once something he wouldn’t dream of letting someone do, sketching with an audience, he’d grown to adore spending time with Will in this way. Seldom did he interrupt him, content to enjoy the stillness. Rafa wondered if a pencil dragging across the paper sounded the way it felt. Was it a scratch-scratch, or did it stutter and tug?

Will patted his knee to get his attention, and he looked over. *The bird’s song. It sounds beautiful.*

Wracking his brain to remember the sound, Rafa found he couldn’t recall if he’d ever heard a goldfinch back when he still could.

He slipped his pencil through the coil of the book’s spiral binding to hold it securely. *Describe it to me?*

Will’s brows drew together, and he turned an ear toward the sound. *It sounds like...small children giggling. It's bright and happy like a perfect summer day. Like a kite dancing on the wind.*

Rafa smirked. *And you said you were no good at poetry.*

*I’ve had a lot of experience describing the way something sounds to my sister.*

***

It’s not much further. Will reached down and grabbed his hand.

“*You need more sunscreen.*”

Will rolled his eyes, letting go of Rafa’s hand. *A ginger’s eternal struggle.*

*But if you know that is gonna happen, why is your hat on backwards?*

*To protect the back of my neck from ticks.*

Rafa was sure that to anyone who might have seen him right then, his flailing and desperate groping of his neck would look hilarious. “*Get it off! Get it off!*”

Will shook his head, placed both hands on Rafa’s shoulders, and turned him around. The brush of Will’s fingers over his skin sent a pleasant chill down his spine. After pulling back the collar of his shirt to check beneath the fabric, Will gave him a clean bill of health. To assuage his fears, Will pulled a bandana from his pack and tied it around Rafa’s neck so that a triangle of the fabric hung down over his nape. *There. That should protect that precious neck of yours.* He kissed the hinge of Rafa’s jaw.

“I love it when you do that.”

*I know. Come on. The campsite is just about 100 yards west of here.*

In no time, they’d arrived at, what Will had described when he convinced him to go camping, the perfect spot. Rafa had been expecting an elaborate set-up for the tent. However, Will had it assembled and staked in less than three minutes.

Rafa whistled, or at least he assumed he whistled. He never had been able to feel a whistle when he tried. *This is nice. I was expecting you to go full survivalist and make a tent out of a tarp.*

Will shook his head. *This was like twenty bucks. Got it on clearance summer before college.* After unrolling both sleeping bags, he zipped them together and lay them out on the tent floor. *Not the softest but it’s not so bad. This is my fourth time at this spot. I’ve moved most of the larger rocks out of the way.*

Four times? *How did you find it?*

*Oh. So one weekend last summer I just needed a break from work and gardening. Looked up good camping places, and this was only like an hour away. I prefer camping in national and state forests because you register with the rangers with your hiking and camping plans. It’s not necessarily safer, but at least someone knows you’re out here. There are spots with more amenities, but they’re usually pretty crowded.*
Thirty minutes later, after they’d set-up their camp and had lunch, the pair of them lay relaxing on a blanket in the shade, enjoying the balmy weather. In order to save their phone batteries for emergency only, they passed a notebook and pen back and forth.

How’d you get into camping?

Will grinned as he read, and Rafa couldn’t help but reach over and poke him in the nose. Will tried to swat away his hand. “Sorry. It’s just so adorably pink...like a cat.

Looking over at him, Will rolled his eyes, but a hint of a smirk played on his pips as he wrote, passing the notebook when he’d finished.

My dad. It’s just our thing. None of my siblings even remotely like camping. Henry is less outdoorsy than you are. “Hey! I like being outdoors just fine. I can give you directions anywhere in New York City without using my phone. Being outdoors in the city is still outdoors. Will, we didn’t have a car. How would we get to a place like this? I can’t even drive, Gui.” When Will fixed him with a pointed stare, Rafa continued reading. Hannah went with us once, but she wandered off, and scared the shit out of Dad. He refuses to take her again until she’s older. Like seriously. She got lost, and it took like four hours to find her.

“Wow. That’s...terrifying.” His heart pounded in his chest at the thought of being left to his own devices in the woods. “Hey, Guilhermino...don’t...don’t let me get lost okay?”

Will sat up, staring at him in earnest.

No. Of course not. Don’t wander away on me, and I think we’ll manage. He cradled Rafa’s face, stroking both cheeks with his thumbs. “Promise.”

“You know, this is my second time camping ever.” He, too, sat up, so he could face Will. “Vovó D took me to Brazil for a graduation present. She said it was her parental duty to show me my roots. It was the best. I mean, Carnaval would have been awesome, but it was still during school. So...”

Will picked back up the notebook and scribbled away. I will take you to Carnaval someday. I promise.

Though he chewed on his bottom lip, Rafa smiled, his cheeks flushing at the sentiment. “Yeah?”

With a small nod, Will reached over and untied the bandana. The heat from his lips against the skin of Rafa’s neck could have ignited a match. A trail of febrile kisses from his pulse point down to his collarbone left him lightheaded and panting. Chest heaving, he reached over and plucked the blue baseball cap from Will’s head, casting it aside. The feeling of his fingers carding through the buzzed short hair at the back of Will’s neck- he enjoyed the softness when he rubbed it one direction, and the coarseness when he went against the grain. The contrasting textures felt amazing against his fingertips. Will mumbled something against his neck, not that Rafa cared in the slightest what actual words were spoken. No. Not at all.

There was an impatient tug on the hem of his shirt. Oh. That’s what he’d said. Rafa reached behind his head ready to tug the shirt over his head, but was stopped as Will did the honors himself. “Or that. That’s good too.” When he nudged him back onto the blanket and started to kiss down Rafa’s bare chest and stomach, he shivered. “That, that is very good.”

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“I’ve never seen so many stars,” Whiskey said with a sigh.

As they lay there on that same blanket where they’d spent most of the afternoon making out, Dex rubbed his thumb back and forth over Whiskey’s skin. Cheek pressed to sunburned cheek, legs stretched out and pointing in opposite directions, and Dex couldn’t recall a moment in his life that had ever been so serene. Even the mosquitoes that occasionally came to dine couldn’t bring him down. Their fire was on its last legs, only giving off a warm, orange glow.

“I’m glad we did this, Gui. Hey, not that I’m gonna know what you’re saying, but is it as quiet out right now as it seems like it is?”

Two pats on his thigh. No, then.

“So, what’s it sound like?”

Dex shifted on the blanket, sitting up to grab the flashlight and notebook once more. Enthralled, Whiskey rolled onto his side, staring up at him. In the low light, their acorn color looked almost like blackjack calla lilies, deep and dark, yet somehow warm and inviting. “I’ll have you know after that beautiful description earlier, I’m expecting like Wordsworth or something.”

Dex shook his head with a chuckle as he trained his ears on the sounds around them. When he’d finished, he turned the book around to show him his lengthy description.

The crickets sound the way a phone vibrating on a wooden desk feels, like a skid, and a shudder, but constant. Then there are cicadas, not many, but I can still hear them. You know how you have to shake all the oats to the bottom of the oatmeal packet before you open it? Well cicadas are like oats cascading down the bag. Some people hate it, but I actually love the sound. It’s familiar. I’ve heard it often. I can hear an owl, though I don’t know what kind, but it sounds like a shiver. In the
distance there’s this bird singing. And it’s like ripples on the water lapping against the pool after a
cannonball. There’s splash and retreat. Splash and retreat. The bullfrogs sound like high tension,
suspense in a movie scene. But they also make this sound that reminds me of the circus,
specifically a circus clown. Funny but also not funny at the same time. You know? You ever hear
a loon? They have this call. It’s sorrowful, and when you get a bunch of them together, it sounds
like grief. Haunting and beautiful.

To his surprise, Whiskey set down the book and retreated towards the tent without a word.
Though he was eager to chase after him, Dex tidied their camp, hanging all food from a sturdy
branch about twelve feet in the air. He sprinkled water on what remained of the fire’s embers and
shook out the blanket before he draped it over a nearby branch. He’d been camping enough times
to know how to best bear-proof the site. So, when he was satisfied, he returned to the tent,
notebook in hand where he found Whiskey, ready for bed and sitting in the middle of the blanket
palette Dex had made earlier. His cheeks were tear-dampened, his eyes averted.

Eager to know what he’d done to upset him, Dex sat in front of him, cupping his chin so he could
turn his face to meet his own. What’s wrong? Was it something I said?

Whiskey shook his head, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

No. I’m just having a
moment. He took a deep breath. The way you described it...I bet it sounds amazing. His hands
went still for a long while, but eventually, Whiskey barked out a pained laugh. “I can picture it
well, how it sounds to you. I wish I could hear it, and I’m pissed that I can’t. This,” he gestured to
his damp face, “is frustration and anger.”

I’m sorry.

“What’s wrong? Was it something I said?”

Dex was content to stay like that forever, but an unwelcome yawn escaped his mouth.

Tired? Me too.

Though it had been warm earlier in the day, now that the sun had gone down, the air held a bit of
a chill. Fine by him, Dex thought. All the better for cuddling. Once they were both as comfortable
as they could be under their blanket, Whiskey scooted over until his body lay right against Dex’s.
He reached out an arm and draped it over his chest. This...wasn’t how they usually slept. Whiskey
would normally fold both arms under his pillow and sleep upon them, face often turned away
from him. But now, as he drifted, Whiskey’s breath evened out, come in warm and soft little puffs
onto Dex’s chest.

Smiling in the dark, Dex reached over and slipped his arm under Whiskey’s arm under Whiskey’s neck. In return,
Whiskey surprised him by turning over, inward, into him. The only response he could come up
with was to wrap his arm, protectively, around Whiskey’s shoulders. This, Dex supposed, was as
close as he’d get to being the big spoon, and he relished in it. Less in their current positions, but
more in what it said. In that moment (at least) not only did Whiskey trust him completely, but he
was safe.

Dex lay awake for a long while enjoying how that made him feel and what that meant.

Chapter End Notes

Portuguese used in chapter:
Bela assistência, Gui- Nice assist, Will
Foda-se essa merda- fuck this shit

End Notes

Come visit me on Tumblr, We can be friends and chat about these lovely characters that N
lets us play with.

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