You're a Pipe Dream
by justdk

Summary

Andrew Minyard just wants some damn cigarettes but he gets a mysterious boy instead.

AU where Mary Hatford and Nathaniel Wesninski went on the run and hid out in hippie communes and farms around the world. Nathaniel, bereft of his mother, is now living in South Carolina and goes by the name Rain.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Chapter 1

Andrew Minyard was annoyed. He finally had some time to himself and he wanted to finish that book Bee had let him borrow at their last session. But of course today Nicky decided that they needed to visit the local smoke shop. Which made no sense. Nicky didn’t smoke; there was no reason why they needed to go. Kevin was irritable, too, because he didn’t want to leave the dorms but he could fucking suffer for all Andrew cared.

The shop was in a miserable strip of stores that were located a few streets away from the heart of the downtown shopping area. From the outside it didn’t look like much—correction—it looked sleazy as hell, the windows dark tinted, ads pasted and peeling from the glass. The sign looked like someone’s idea of “trippy”: wobbly black letters on a tie-dye background. The place was called Pipe Dream and it was, according to the sign, a “smoke shop & adult book store.”

Andrew stared at the store while Nicky fidgeted in the back seat.


Kevin slouched down in the passenger seat, arms crossed over his chest.

“I just want to pick up some stuff for the room,” Nicky replied evasively.

“We don’t need anything they’re selling,” Kevin stated, shooting Nicky a disapproving look.

“Guys, we’re already here, can we please go in? We look like creepers right now.”

Andrew scanned the mostly empty parking lot. Pipe Dream was bordered by a derelict tattoo parlor called Lowkey Tattoo, a chicken wing takeout, and a liquor store. Andrew could already imagine the types of people who would migrate to this spot, hitting up one shop after the other and ending the night wasted, watching porn, sporting an ill-advised tattoo, and getting indigestion from 3am chicken wings and hot sauce.

“Yeah, we’re real creepers,” Andrew drawled. But he got out of the car, pocketing his keys and stretching. At the very least this should be amusing.

Nicky led the way, followed by Kevin, with Andrew bringing up the rear. A bell chimed as each of them crossed the threshold. The shop smelled strongly of incense, with a barely detectable undercurrent of pot. Andrew glanced around the space, taking in the layout and looking for threats. The only person was the guy sitting behind the counter. Once Andrew noticed him he had a difficult time looking away. The kid was cute; his curly hair dyed a deep violet that drew attention to the freckles on his cheeks. His eyes were black and Andrew instantly pegged that the kid was wearing contacts. His earlobes were stretched and accessorized by skull plugs and he had a wicked little lip piercing. The only problem was the guy’s wardrobe: an oversized Grateful Dead t-shirt and worn jeans.

Andrew kind of hated the whole hippie throwback culture. In his opinion the good times that so many of his illogical classmates idolized never actually existed. If people wanted to do drugs, sleep around, and chill then they should just do it and not make it all about reliving the Golden Years that not even their parents experienced. Which meant that Andrew was already predisposed to dislike the guy, good looks notwithstanding.

“Hey,” the guy said, “let me know if I can help y’all find anything.” He was going for a southern accent but it didn’t quite work. Maybe it would have fooled most people but it didn’t fool Andrew.
Dyed hair, contacts, fake accent…who was this kid?

“Thanks,” Nicky said cheerfully. He started browsing the shelves of merchandise, peering into the cases like he might actually buy some of the pipes displayed. His eyes strayed to the room in the back, the one separated from the rest of the shop by a beaded curtain and the handwritten sign declaring it off limits to anyone under the age of 18.

“Did I really bring you here so you could buy porn?” Andrew asked Nicky. He didn’t bother to whisper and Nicky blushed, shooting embarrassed looks towards the guy at the counter, not that the kid was paying them any special attention. Kevin snorted and shook his head.

“Guys,” Nicky hissed, “shut up.”

“Oh no, Kevin, Nicky is mad at us!” Kevin started snickering. It really wasn’t that funny but whatever.

“Y’all are the worst,” Nicky muttered, and walked purposefully into the over 18 room. Andrew followed out of boredom and Kevin followed him out of necessity. Andrew snuck a peek at the worker dude but he was seemingly engrossed in some magazine.

Nicky started browsing the shelves of eclectic DVDs, but not with any real interest. Andrew had a sneaking suspicion that Nicky had some ulterior plans at work but so far he hadn’t figured it out. Kevin was examining a pinup of a very voluptuous anime girl being attacked by tentacles. Andrew did not get the appeal but apparently other people did because there was a small section labeled “hentai” in the corner.

“Kevin, if you buy that you are not putting it up in the dorm,” Andrew warned.

“What?” Kevin startled, looking almost ashamed. “No, umm, I was trying to see who the artist is. I think I recognize the drawing style…”

Andrew shook his head once, not buying that excuse at all.

“Oh my god!” Nicky squealed. “You guys! There’s Supernatural porn! How did I not know this existed? Look! Look!” He was holding up a DVD case with a man wearing a trench coat, angel wings, and nothing else. A strategically placed pizza box covered his junk and the title was The Pizza Man Cums. Nicky was beaming like he had found buried treasure. Andrew had seen enough; he left the two college boys to their fantasies and went to see what the smoke shop sold that wasn’t porn or sex toys.

The guy at the counter looked up and offered a small smile. “Need any help?” Andrew drifted closer, pretending to look at the lighters displayed at the counter. Some of them were really cool, much better than the disposable Bics he carried.

“This one’s pretty nice,” the guy said, picking up a sleek black lighter. He thumbed the wheel back and a green flame shot up. The kid stared into the flame with an intense look on his face and Andrew used the moment to read his nametag. The word RAIN was written in neat capital letters. No way was that his real name.

Andrew reached out and took the lighter, his fingers brushing against the other guy’s for a moment. A small skull was etched into the metal.

“How much?” Andrew asked.

“It’s $20. Want me to hold onto it while you look around?” The kid’s eyes were so…haunting. It had
to be the black contacts, merging the iris and pupil together in a seamless circle of darkness.

“I don’t need anything else. Unless…” Andrew’s attention snagged on the cigarettes. They were all imports, lined up above a selection of pipe tobacco and flavored shisha. Andrew recognized some of the brands, not that he had a lot of time or interest to be any sort of connoisseur. “Can I get a pack of the Black Devils, chocolate flavor?”

The guy retrieved the pack and put it on the counter next to the lighter.

“You know, smoking will kill you.”

“You work in a smoke shop…” Andrew gestured at him.

“Rain, my name’s Rain,” the kid supplied. He was grinning in a way that Andrew felt was completely uncalled for.

“Yeah, okay. I’m Andrew.”

“Andrew,” Rain smiled again. “Are you a student?”

“Uh-huh. You?”

Rain shook his head, spending those purple curls falling over his forehead. If Andrew just focused on him from the neck up he could forget about the kid’s awful wardrobe.

“You’re not in high school are you?” Andrew didn’t think underage kids could work in a place like this but you never could tell.

“Oh, no! No, no. It’s just, college isn’t in the cards right now, if ever. Life. You know.” Rain’s voice was disingenuously light; he was trying to act like it didn’t matter to him but clearly it did.

Kevin took that moment to join them. His hands were empty and Andrew sneered at him.

“It’s okay, Kevin, I won’t judge you for your hentai fetish,” Andrew said. Kevin scowled and glared at him, then at Rain, who was trying to hide his smile.

“Look, man, I don’t judge, either. I’ve seen a lot of strange shit and trust me, hentai barely makes the list.”

Andrew gave Rain an appraising look. “Oh? What kind of ‘strange shit’?”

Rain shrugged. “I’d rather not say.”

Nicky had also emerged from the room and was poking around the store. He eventually joined them at the counter and set down his findings: sandalwood incense, a gay pride flag, a poster of Johnny Depp playing the piano, and the Supernatural porn. Rain rang it up without comment and put it in a purple bag that had the store’s name printed on the front.

Andrew paid for the lighter and cigarettes. For some reason he wanted to linger but then Kevin started huffing and complaining.

“Jesus, Andrew. You need to quit that stuff. You’re an athlete, you can’t perform your best when you’re poisoning your body like that.” Andrew flipped Kevin off. He had heard this _ad nauseam_.

Rain raised his eyebrows, glancing back and forth between Kevin and Andrew.
“What sport do you play?” he asked.

“Exy,” Andrew, Kevin, and Nicky replied in unison.

Andrew could have sworn that Rain’s skin paled.
Buying the lighter had been a mistake. Every time Andrew lit up he was reminded of Rain: his purple hair and lip ring, his matte black eyes hiding their true colors behind contacts. His damn memory replayed Rain’s voice as he pulled the pack of cigarettes from his back pocket Need any help? That accent. It wasn’t true South Carolina southern though Rain had it close enough to fool almost everyone. Rain was a mystery. He didn’t fit his name, his clothes, or that sketchy smoke shop. Andrew was bored enough that he spent more time than was advisable trying to piece together a plausible story for the kid.

Andrew had also formed an inadvisable preference for chocolate cigarettes. As he settled down at his perch in his usual thinking/smoking spot on the roof of Fox Tower, Andrew tried to work out the problem of the smoke shop kid. While he smoked he used his vantage point to spy on the other students and athletes. People did the weirdest shit in their cars when they thought no one could see them. Andrew wasn’t a perv but he had accidentally witnessed more than a few backseat hookups. He had also gathered enough intel on his teammates to give himself an edge in their betting pools. Usually smoking on the roof was enough to keep his restlessness in check but as Andrew flicked the stub of his last cigarette over the edge he still felt just as unsatisfied and antsy. If he was in Columbia he would have dragged Kevin and Nicky and Aaron to Eden’s before abandoning them and hooking up with Roland. Of course, Andrew had the option of calling Roland right now but he had to admit to himself that he wasn’t quite high enough to make phone sex appealing.

Thinking about phone sex immediately brought up memories of what Roland sounded like during their backroom quickies. Andrew shoved the mental replay away; it wasn’t working for him right then. Instead, a different voice broke into Andrew’s thoughts—Rain’s faux southern, purposefully chill voice—and that was a problem.

But was it really? Andrew didn’t mess around with his teammates and he definitely didn’t screw with his classmates. It was better if everyone at Palmetto State kept thinking of him as the Monster: unapproachable and untouchable. However Rain wasn’t a college student; he wasn’t connected to Andrew in any way, which meant he could be a potential fuck buddy. Casual. Uncomplicated. Random. It was an added bonus that the guy was easy on the eyes and intriguing enough not to be boring. It was worth a shot.

Having made up his mind Andrew headed back to his room to grab his keys and wallet. He had to pass by Nicky and Aaron’s room. Aaron was gone, probably at the library, but Nicky was in.

“Andrew! Where are you running off to?” Nicky yelled from his bed. He had his computer open on his lap, the gay pride flag hanging from the wall behind him. Andrew could smell the incense burning and he was fairly certain that the combination of Nicky’s Pipe Dream purchases had been enough to scare Aaron out of the room for the time being; perhaps that had been Nicky’s plan all along. Their cousin was devious enough to plot something like that.

“I’m out of cigarettes,” Andrew answered.

“You going back to that smoke shop?”

Andrew nodded, fidgeting with his keys.

“Hey, get that kid’s number for me, will you?” Nicky asked, grinning in a totally inappropriate way.
“Nicky, you’re engaged,” Andrew reminded him.

Nicky sighed dramatically. “You’re no fun. And I was joking, obviously. I’m 100% in love with Erik. Still, the things I could do to that mouth…” Nicky bit his lip suggestively and winked. “You noticed he has that lip ring right? Makes me wonder what else he’s got pierced.”

Andrew had heard enough. He left Nicky and checked in with Kevin. As usual Kevin was camped out in their common area, watching exy games and doing pushups during commercial breaks.

“I’m going out,” Andrew interrupted him. “Don’t leave.”

“I won’t.” Kevin did several more pushups, stopping when he counted 20. “We’re running low on vodka if you happen to go by the store.”

Andrew nodded and left.

It was a little unsettling to go somewhere without the full entourage of Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron. Kevin needed people around him at all times and since he and Andrew had made their deal they spent nearly every hour when they weren’t in class together. And yet, somehow, despite all their togetherness, Kevin had never picked up on the fact that Andrew was gay, and Andrew wanted to keep it that way. Roland was his secret. Maybe Rain could be a secret, too.

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Admittedly Andrew’s intentions on returning to Pipe Dream were not totally pure but the second he saw Rain he forgot about them.

Rain was slumped against the counter but his head shot up the moment the buzzer announced that there was a customer. His eyes were wide and his face was pale and…there was a massive bruise covering his left cheek and his lower lip was swollen.

Andrew knew he was staring but he couldn’t stop. Rain blushed under the scrutiny and ducked his head, his hair falling forward but it wasn’t long enough to cover the damage. Andrew walked to the counter and had to remind himself not to reach out and touch. Rain looked up and met his eyes. For a brief moment Andrew caught a glimpse of some complicated emotion but it was quickly buried behind a polite façade.

“Andrew,” Rain said. “You’re back.” His tone was even, lacking the light, easy going manner he had possessed the last time Andrew had talked with him.

“Obviously,” Andrew replied. “What happened to your face?”

Rain laughed, quick and caustic. “Wow. You don’t beat around the bush.” He pushed his hair off his forehead, giving Andrew a full view of the injury. “It’s actually not that exciting. I got hurt unloading some merchandise. What can I say? I’m a klutz.”

And that was a lie if Andrew ever heard one. He wanted to call bullshit but this wasn’t his problem. Rain wasn’t his problem. Without knowing it Rain had just removed himself from Andrew’s ‘potential hookup’ radar. He didn’t need another lost lamb with a boatload of baggage.

“Okay,” Andrew said. He tapped the counter once, twice. Not his problem. “I need a couple packs of the chocolate cigarettes.”

Rain turned and reached up for them. The sleeve of his oversized shirt slid down his arm, pooling around his shoulder. It was enough for Andrew to see more bruises, clearly shaped from where a
large hand had gripped and squeezed. Andrew felt the muscles in his abdomen contract in sympathetic pain. He could see how it had played out: someone physically larger than Rain grabbing his arm to restrain him and then punching the side of his face. Whoever had done it would have bruised knuckles. Andrew took deep breaths, trying to calm the burning anger in his gut and the cold wash of memories.

“Here you go—” Rain recoiled when he turned and took a look at Andrew. A flash of fear passed over his face before he settled into a carefully neutral expression. Andrew was having a more difficult time reigning in his anger.

“Did you get the bruises on your arm from mishandling merchandise?” Andrew asked.

Rain crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged. “Sure.” The way the baggy Phish T-shirt hung off his frame made him look more slender than he was. Small. Fragile. Vulnerable. Goddammit. “So, will that be all?” Rain asked, his smile viciously polite.

“Yeah, that’s all,” Andrew answered, handing over his credit card while Rain rang him up. They waited in tense silence while the credit card machine ran the transaction and spit out receipts.

Andrew took the purple bag from Rain and stalked towards the door. He was upset, and more than that he was upset that he was upset. *This* was why looking for a hookup was more trouble than it was worth.

“Andrew! Wait!”

Andrew stopped in his tracks, one hand on the door, but he didn’t turn around. He made Rain come to him.

“Uh, you forgot your receipt.” Rain came up next to him. He looked flustered. He exhaled hard and ran his fingers through his curls. Andrew noticed a small tattoo behind his ear but couldn’t make out what it was. “Look, I didn’t mean to be rude. I don’t really like people in my business, okay?”

Andrew shrugged. “You’re right. It’s not my business.”

“Okay, good. Fine. So, we’re alright?”

Andrew laughed. It sounded cruel. “There’s no we, Rain. I’m just a guy buying cigarettes and you…” Andrew paused, debating, and then decided what the hell. “You’re an enigma.”

Rain tilted his head to the side. “Yeah? Most guys just say that I’m hot but I’ll take it.”

“Is that right?” Andrew took a closer look. Of course Rain was hot but more than that he was *interesting*. For example, there were the scars that were revealed whenever the stretched out collar of Rain’s T-shirt drifted too far down or to the side. There was scarring on his arms, too, faded almost to invisibility. As Andrew gave Rain a closer examination the disparate pieces clicked together in his mind: runaway. Shit. Rain was definitely attractive but almost certainly more trouble than he was worth. Andrew tried to tamp down on his growing interest before speaking again. “You know, my cousin Nicky wanted me to get your number.”

“Oh. Yeah, right. Of course not.” Rain was folding the receipt into smaller and smaller triangles, his attention focused on the paper and not Andrew. “Look, forget I said anything. It’s been a weird
“Don’t worry about.” Andrew plucked the tiny paper triangle from Rain’s fingers and slipped it into his pocket. Rain gave him a complicated look but didn’t say anything. Andrew opened the door, the buzzer making its automated chime, but he didn’t leave just yet. “A bit of advice, Rain. Learn to duck.”

Andrew didn’t linger to see Rain’s reaction. The entire experience had unsettled him; enough that he almost forgot to buy Kevin’s vodka. He headed towards the liquor store, Steve’s Package Store. Andrew breezed in and grabbed a handle of Smirnoff plus a bottle of Fireball for the Friday night drinking games that the Foxes hosted in Dan’s room; it was the Monsters’ turn to buy for the team.

There was a tiny blonde working the register. She was in the process of bagging a purchase for a bear of man—tall, broad, muscular, and bearded like a lumberjack. Two things about the man immediately pinged Andrew’s interest: he smelled like the smoke shop and he was wearing the same fucking Grateful Dead T-shirt that Rain had worn the last time Andrew had been at the shop. The man thanked the cashier and reached for the bag. That’s when Andrew noticed the next damning detail—the busted knuckles on the man’s right hand.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning for abuse

It took all of Andrew’s considerable self-control to wait while the cashier rang him up and bagged the liquor. He wasn’t thinking rationally. His brain had connected the man and Rain, the bruise and the fist, and now the rest of him was itching to deliver some payback. He felt reckless and violent, like he had felt when he had beaten the men who had assaulted Nicky. The drugs in his system were doing little to inhibit his aggression and that was a problem. It was all one big fucking problem because if he lost it here he could lose everything. Would Wymack give him another chance? Would he be allowed to?

Andrew took his bag and left the package store. He set the drinks in the passenger seat of his car and braced his hands on the hood, taking deep breaths like Bee had taught him, focusing his thoughts. Rain was not his problem. Rain was no one. Rain was an adult, or at the very least, probably not a minor. This wasn’t his fight. It wasn’t. And yet Andrew’s feet took him back to the smoke shop. He stood in front of the glass door and peered in.

The man was standing in front of the counter, his bulk almost completely blocking Rain from view. The bag was on the counter and the man was leaning forward into Rain’s space. And Rain—fuck. He looked cowed, shrinking down as if he could hide himself in that ridiculous shirt. Andrew noted that Rain had positioned himself out of arms reach; the man would need to lunge over the counter in order to touch him, and that would give Rain time to get away. But where would he go, Andrew wondered, and why would he stay?

Andrew’s hands were balled into fists and he was breathing hard. He didn’t like seeing Rain looking so scared. And he hated the asshole for hitting Rain, for threatening him, for fuck all that he might have done. Andrew had been there: he had been abused and trapped, with nowhere to go and no one to see him. Wasn’t he supposed to intervene here? Even if Rain wasn’t his problem?

Rain’s attention strayed from the man for a moment, drifted until he noticed Andrew. His eyes bugged and he took a step back. Andrew reached for the door and Rain shook his head, no. The man didn’t like that. While Rain was distracted the man reached out and grabbed the front of his shirt, yanking him forward until Rain’s stomach collided, hard, with the edge of the counter. Andrew could see Rain’s face contort with pain, his eyes squinting shut as the man buried his hand in Rain’s hair and jerked his head up, his body still pinned to the counter. The man was yelling but Andrew couldn’t understand what he was saying. Rain said something back and the man lifted his head, only to slam the side of his face, the bruised side, down onto the counter.

Andrew growled, hands clenching and unclenching as he watched. He wanted to stop it, so badly, but Rain had said no and Andrew knew that sometimes even Good Samaritans could unknowingly make a bad situation worse. But he couldn’t leave. There was the chance that the man would go too far, that intervention would be necessary.

Finally, finally the man had had enough. He shoved Rain off the counter, pointing to the door at the back of the shop. Andrew noticed that Rain was bleeding, it was dripping down his face and neck, soaking into the shirt. Rain took the bag of drinks and headed to the back while the man walked
around the counter to take his place. Andrew ghosted out of sight. Instead of leaving he walked to
the end of the strip mall and headed for the back. Behind the shops was a mess of dumpsters, random
shit, employee cars, and Rain.

Andrew approached him slowly, making enough noise that he wouldn’t startle him. Rain was sitting
on the ground, a wad of tissues pressed against his puffy nose. He heard Andrew approaching and
looked up, the bruised side of his face swelling.

“Hey,” Rain said, his voice hoarse and quiet. Andrew knelt down in front of him, examining the
wounds.

“How didn’t you want me to come in?” Andrew asked. He was working so hard to keep his tone
calm even though he was furious. “If there was a customer present then he wouldn’t have done that
to you.”

Rain thought about it for a moment and he looked down at this blood splattered Converse. “I didn’t
want him to see you.”

“I can protect myself,” Andrew scoffed.

“It’s not that… I mean, I know, I know you can but…” Rain waved his free hand helplessly. “You’re
not a part of this shit. And I like that, okay? If he saw you he would probably say something about it
later, something bad and I don’t want to hear that, not about you.”

“Explain.”

“Jesus…” Rain hissed. He pulled the tissue from his nose, snorting to clear the passage of blood. He
leaning to the side and spat out a glob of blood, his teeth tinted red with it. The lower half of his face
was still streaked with gore, his shirt wet with it. Andrew felt a little sick because he had been there,
too. “He would make some kind of gross comment about you. Because you’re blond and fit and
good-looking. Because you’re young. Okay? And I would prefer that he never knows you exist. So
you should probably leave, right now.”

Andrew sat back on his heels and laughed. Rain scowled at him and fuck he was still cute, even
battered and bloody and wearing those awful clothes.

“Well, since you don’t want me around…” Andrew moved to stand up but Rain reached out for him
first, his bloody fingers hovering near Andrew’s wrist.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Rain admitted, “but you shouldn’t stay.”

Andrew settled back down and Rain dropped his hand, holding it to his chest. Andrew pulled the
cigarettes and lighter from his back pocket and lit it; he offered the pack to Rain but he declined,
explaining that it was enough for him to just smell the smoke.

Andrew exhaled the smoke into Rain’s face, feeling weirdly charmed that the kid leaned into the
smoke and inhaled it. For a brief moment everything felt normal and Andrew let himself imagine
Rain shotgunning with him.

“So,” Andrew started, “what’s going on here?”

Rain smiled a little. “You’re smoking, I’m inhaling.”

“I meant what’s happening with that giant bastard, dumbass.”
Rain looked away and shrugged. “It’s fine.”

Andrew flicked ashes at Rain’s face. “It is not fine. Use a dictionary. Rain. If you look up the word it will not say: ‘being pummeled by an enormous pervert.’”

Rain sighed. “Yeah, okay, it’s not fine. But it’s a really long story and he’s not going to let me hide back here forever. I gotta cover the counter for the rest of the day. So break time’s over.” He stood up and dusted his corduroys off; Andrew looked up at him and frowned. Who the fuck wore corduroys by choice?

Andrew ground out his cigarette and left the butt on the ground with the sizable collection of trash, mostly cigarettes and cans, chip bags and… needles. This place was a fucking health hazard and they had just been lounging here. Disgusting.

Andrew stood and gave Rain another once over. It was irksome that Rain was slightly taller than him, probably by a couple inches, but at least Andrew had a better build, Rain looked as fragile as a beanpole. Probably no one ever fed him as a child. Rain was fidgeting, pulling at the hem of his shirt and Christ blushing.

“Thanks for checking on me,” Rain said, finally looking at Andrew. The wariness and tension had melted from him and now he just looked tired. And adorably awkward. “Umm, I’ll see ya around.”

Andrew wanted to hug him. He wanted to touch him, even though Rain was a mess, even though he was probably the worst kind of trouble. He forced his arms to stay at his side.

“Yeah, you will,” he replied. Rain bobbed his head and then unlocked the backdoor of the shop and slipped inside.

Andrew didn’t wait around, though he did take the time to check out the Volkswagen bus parked out back. It was plastered with bumper stickers promoting music festivals, environmental causes, and bands like Grateful Dead, the Allman Brothers, Phish, the Flaming Lips, the Red Hot Chili Peppers—all the groups that Andrew didn’t listen to. The windows of the van were dark tinted and also covered by curtains. The front seat didn’t reveal much other than a bobble head Jesus and a figurine of a Hawaiian girl wearing a grass skirt and coconuts, a cannabis leaf air freshener hung from the rear view mirror. Basically it looked like it should belong to the hippy stoner type but Andrew knew the truth: it belonged to some poser asshole that beat up kids. He wrote down the license plate.

Andrew was in awful mood by the time he returned to the dorms. He shoved the bottle of vodka into Kevin’s waiting hands before leaving. He was not in a good place. He stalked down the hall to the girls’ room and pounded on the door until Renee opened it. She took one look at him and smiled, it was a knowing smile.

“Need to spar?” she asked. Andrew jerked his head in a nod. “Give me five minutes to change. Meet you in the parking lot?”

Andrew nodded again and went back to his room. He pulled off his jeans and threw them on the floor. It was childish but the animosity tearing through him demanded that he hit something. The pink scars on Andrew’s thighs stood out starkly against his pale skin and he tried not to look at them as he pulled on a pair of soft, grey sweatpants. As he bent to tie his shoes he noticed a bit of paper peeking out of his jeans’ pocket. He picked it up; it was the receipt that Rain had given him, folded into a tight triangle. Andrew picked at it, straightening out the slip. Scrawled on the bottom, in blue ink, was a nine digit number and Rain’s name. Suddenly Rain’s awkwardness when Andrew had
mentioned Nicky asking for his number made so much sense. Everything made a lot more sense. Andrew quickly added the number to his contacts before leaving to find Renee.
Chapter 4

Renee was sitting on the hood of Andrew’s car, arms crossed over her chest, feet resting on the curb. Her pastel tinted hair was tied back tight and pinned to her skull; she had learned early on that Andrew fought dirty and would use any advantage, including yanking loose hair or a ponytail. Not that Renee played by the rules, either. Andrew had suffered from more than a few kicks to the groin that left him limping and surly.

Andrew unlocked the car and Renee slid into the passenger seat. She didn’t bother trying to talk to him and gazed absently out the window, a small smile on her lips. They drove until they got to the court and Andrew punched in the code to let them in. The halls were dark and echoed with their footsteps. Andrew moved quicker, wanting to get out of the tunnel-like space and onto the open court.

The massive space dwarfed them. Without the team to distract him or the crowd to fill the seats Andrew felt uneasy; the area was too large to keep track of. He tried to imagine bringing Rain here: what would the wary runaway make of this place? He remembered Rain’s bizarre reaction to hearing that he and Kevin and Nicky played Exy; it was like the kid had seen a ghost. What was going on with him? *Runaway, victim, liar.* Andrew didn’t like those variables.

He and Renee did their warm-up stretches and then faced off, circling each other. Andrew put aside his concerns about Rain and focused on Renee, she was a crafty fighter and if he let his guard down he would pay for it. Renee extended her arm towards him, palm up, and beckoned him with her fingers, a cocky grin on her usually serene face.

“We’re not in a fucking martial arts film, Walker,” Andrew growled.

“Language, Minyard,” Renee reminded him.

Andrew lunged forward, going for a quick strike but Renee blocked him, spun around, and tried to deliver a punch to his kidneys. The fight went downhill from there. They fought fast and messy, trying to find and exploit weaknesses, making cheap shots and using every advantage they had. Renee was the better fighter and probably always would be, but she had taught Andrew a lot, most of it for self-defense or street fights. They were small individuals facing a nasty, fucked up world, and if anyone needed to learn how to protect themselves, it was them. Not that Andrew often used his skills for self-defense.

The fight ended with Renee sitting on Andrew’s chest, her forearm crushing his throat. She had cleverly pinned his arms with her knees. Andrew could have, maybe, leveraged her off but after all the hits he had taken he didn’t think it was worth the effort. He stomped his foot twice to let her know he was done and Renee pulled back and hopped to her feet. It made no damn sense that she still had so much energy after a fight. Andrew stayed down, touching his sore neck and feeling the aches spreading through his body. His abdomen hurt, his face hurt, everything hurt. Distantly he wondered about Rain and his injuries, his scars. Renee sat next to him and cracked her knuckles, her gaze sweeping the stadium.

“Feeling better?” Renee asked.

“I feel like I got hit by a fucking truck,” Andrew griped. Renee tsked at the swear word. “But I think I found some clarity.

“Oh? Do tell.”
“It’s about a boy,” Andrew began and Renee laughed. Andrew tried to smack her leg but she deflected it.

“It’s always about a boy,” Renee teased.

“It is not,” Andrew replied, annoyed at how sullen he sounded.

“Well, typically you’re angry at Kevin or Aaron or Nicky. Or you’re missing your mystery man in Columbia. So yes, it’s usually about a boy.” Renee didn’t mention that sometimes it was about Andrew’s past. They both had demons they didn’t like to talk about. “What’s the boy’s name?”

Andrew considered not telling her but he did need some advice so he relented. “His name is Rain.” Renee gave him a skeptical look. “Yeah, I don’t think it’s his real name. He’s this wannabe hippie working at that smoke shop downtown.” Renee nodded. “The problem is there’s this asshole who’s been beating Rain up and it seems like the kid has no way out. He doesn’t want me to be involved but he also gave me his number so…there’s that.”

Renee thought about it, her lower lip caught between her teeth. “You’ve already made up your mind,” she stated. “You’re going to do something.”

Andrew nodded.

Renee sighed. “Well, if it gets bloody you know I’m good for an assist.”

“Thanks.” That was all Andrew needed to hear, all he needed to know. Renee was one of the very few people whose advice Andrew paid attention to; if she had shot down the idea he might have given up. Maybe.

Back at Fox Tower Renee and Andrew split up, Renee skipping off to her room like she hadn’t taken any damage. Andrew moved more slowly, unlocking the door to the dorm suite and ignoring Aaron and Katelyn, who were, of all things, eating ice cream and watching a medical documentary. Kevin was in their room studying, his headphones on and a mug of green tea at his elbow. Andrew could hear Nicky in the other room, rambling in German, probably on a video chat with Erik. Andrew felt a little of his tension drain away, knowing that all of his people were safe and in their proper places. He grabbed a towel and headed to the bathroom.

The bathroom was a mess, per usual. It was largely Nicky’s mess, hair products scattered about, used Q-tips on the floor near the trashcan but not in it, the short dark hairs from his daily shaving littered across the sink. The tissue box was empty again. Someone had spilt shampoo down the edge of the tub and not bothered to wipe it off the floor. There was plaque on the mirror, as well as a stupid inspirational quote that Kevin had scrawled. “Pain is weakness leaving the body.” Andrew smudged the quote. Pain was pain, pure and simple.

Andrew turned the water on and let it heat up until the room was filled with steam. He stepped beneath the spray, adjusting the showerhead, as he always had to do because he lived with fucking giants. The water was scalding and it beat on his skin hard enough to count as a massage. The last of his tension melted away and he relaxed for a brief moment. He squeezed some of Nicky’s sandalwood scented shampoo in his hair, the scent reminding him of the smoke shop with its murky, incense heavy smell. That smell soaked in after awhile and Rain had been saturated with it. Andrew wondered what Rain actually smelled like. And from there he wondered about a lot of other useless, sensory things like taste and touch.

A heavy knock at the door brought Andrew out of his reverie and he finished cleaning up and showering, but not so quickly that it would be seen as him giving in to whoever was waiting for the
facilities. When Andrew opened the door Kevin was looming just outside, glaring.

“Shouldn’t drink all that green tea, Kevin,” Andrew commented as Kevin slammed and locked the bathroom door. Just to be a brat Andrew locked him out of their bedroom. He picked up his phone and slumped on his bed. He scrolled through his meager list of contacts until he found the one he wanted: Pig. He tapped the call button and waited.

“Officer Higgins.” That voice. That goddamned voice. Andrew inhaled and held it before answering.

“It’s Andrew.”

“Oh fuck,” Higgins swore softly. “Minyard?”

“Yes.”

There was more groaning, the sound of a forehead meeting a palm; Andrew was familiar with this sound, as familiar as he was with Officer Higgins. Unfortunately.

“Why are you calling me? I thought you hated my guts and never wanted me to contact you.”

“That’s correct,” Andrew agreed. He stretched out on the bed, enjoying Higgins’ tantrum. “I never said that I wouldn’t call you.”

“Shit… so what is it? What’s going on? Are you and Aaron okay?”

“Oh yeah, we’re just dandy,” Andrew replied.

“I was sorry to hear about your mother.”

“Hmm. The less said about that the better. Have you been checking up on us?”

Higgins cleared his throat, a sure sign that he wanted to drop the subject. “Your uncle told me.”

“How very thoughtful of him,” Andrew snarled. “Speaking of uncles and family… I need you to do me a favor.”

The silence on the other end spoke volumes. Andrew could hear Higgins’ chair squeak as he shifted, heard his heavy exhalation. He could picture every detail of Officer Higgins perfectly; right now he was imagining the man’s look of abject defeat.

“What.” Higgins bit out the word.

“I need you to run a plate.”

“No. That’s illegal. You know that, Andrew.”

“Yes and I don’t give a fuck about legality. You owe me. Remember?”

There was a lot of grumbling and cursing on the other end. Andrew placed the phone next to his pillow and listened to Higgins fume. Once the man had shut up Andrew recited the plate number and waited. It wasn’t long before Higgins had the information he needed.

“Alright, Minyard, here’s the deal. The guy has one mark on his record for assault and battery, but that was over five years ago. Otherwise he’s clean. Whatever beef you have with him I suggest you drop it.”
Andrew strangled his pillow. “Oh, I don’t have a problem with him, Officer,” Andrew lied. “I’m simply a concerned citizen.”

“Right, and I’m Santa Clause,” Higgins scoffed.

“Are you? How disturbing. I need the guy’s name and address.”

“Hell no.”

“Higgins. I can find out other ways, you know. Less pleasant ways, certainly very dangerous to myself and others. Would you like another accident lying at your door?”

Andrew waited as Higgins went on a tirade about all sorts of boring things like the law and blackmail and second chances. Kevin was back and rattling the doorknob to be let in but Andrew ignored him. That’s what he got for disturbing Andrew’s shower time. Finally Higgins relented, probably knowing that if he refused Andrew would keep calling back and pestering him until he gave him the information. Andrew had a couple backup plans but going through Higgins was the most direct and accurate way of obtaining the information he wanted.

“Jason Reilly. 137 Terrace Rd.”

“That wasn’t so bad was it?” Andrew asked. “Pleasure doing business with you.” He was about to hang up when he heard Higgins squawking at him.

“Andrew! Wait! This is the last time. We’re even now, okay?”

Andrew laughed. It sounded cold, even to his ears. “Oh Higgins, Pig Higgins, we’re never going to be even. Take care.” He hung up and basked in victory before getting up to let Kevin in.

Kevin was extra annoying, like a giant cat that had its fur rubbed the wrong way. He glowered at Andrew and said a few cutting things about his new non-sports related injuries but Andrew simply flipped him off. He was too busy searching the name and address that Higgins had given him.

Andrew spend the rest of the day researching, compiling a list of information about Jason Reilly, owner of Pipe Dream smoke shop. On the surface the man looked clean, other than that one charge, but Andrew had seen Rain’s wrecked face, he had seen the violence that the man had perpetrated with such callous ease and efficiency. Every single one of his survivor instincts was telling him that this man was more than just an abuser and that Rain was in a shitload of trouble.

After clearing his browser history Andrew grabbed his cigarettes and phone and headed to the roof. He sat on the edge and lit up. His mind was rapidly sorting through information and pulling together a plan. Although Andrew wanted to do something immediately he knew it took time to properly eliminate human problems. Tilda, for all that he had shared a house with her, had not been an easy target. Andrew brushed the memory aside and called Rain. It was impulse, not planning. It was curiosity and interest and—

“Hello?” Rain’s voice was hoarse and scratchy, almost unintelligible.

“Hi Rain. It’s Andrew.”

Rain sucked in a breath. “Hi. I… I didn’t think you’d call.”

“You hid your number pretty well. I might have missed it.”

“Yeah,” Rain’s voice was a whisper. “Hold on.”
Andrew strained his ears and heard a door close, a lock snick into place, padded footsteps, another door closing and locking.

“Okay, I’m back,” Rain was still whispering.

“You’re not okay, are you?” Andrew asked.

“It’s complicated,” Rain answered. “I’m fine, though, really.”

Andrew swallowed his groan of frustration. This kid. “Right. Of course. I don’t have time for liars, Rain.”

Rain laughed, it sounded bleak. “You must not talk to many people, then.”

“I really don’t. Why did you give me your number if you’re just going to lie to me?”

“I don’t know.” A sigh. “I really don’t know, Andrew. Sorry for wasting your time.”

This wasn’t going how Andrew had thought it would. He took another drag of his cigarette, picturing the way Rain had leaned in to breathe the smoke, the way his pained face had relaxed a bit. He knew why he was calling Rain but that didn’t have any relevance to Rain’s motives for giving him the number in the first place.

“I don’t think this is a waste of time.”

They were both quiet for several minutes. Andrew wondered where Rain was hiding for this phone call. He wondered where the kid slept at night, what he ate, if he had to share all of his shirts with that fucking asshole Jason Reilly.

Andrew finally broke the silence. “We have a game this Friday but we’re going to party after. Want to come?”

“I can’t. I’m, ah, working that night.”

“Right.” Andrew knew the hours of the smoke shop; they weren’t open past eight. So Rain was mostly likely lying, again. “Rain check?”

Rain chuckled. “I haven’t heard that one before,” he said, his voice heavy with sarcasm. “But sure, maybe I can go party with you some other time.”

They were quiet again but Andrew didn’t mind.

“What position do you play?” Rain asked.

“I’m the goalkeeper,” Andrew replied. He sent his cigarette plunging over the edge of the roof. It almost landed on Allison and Seth.

“I see.” Rain hesitated and then asked, “What about the others?”

“Nicky’s a backliner, Kevin’s a striker, and my brother is also a backliner. Our team currently has nine players and our coach is trying to recruit more. Do you follow exy?”

“Not really.” More lies.

“Okay.”
Someone started yelling and Rain sighed. “Hey Andrew? I gotta go. But thank you.” Rain’s voice was so soft and his accent had dropped completely. “Thanks for calling me.”

“Sure. See you around, Rain.” The call disconnected and Andrew stared at the screen of his phone, watching until it went dark.
“Dammit Minyard! Are you even trying?” Wymack’s tirade was coming in loud and clear, even though he was standing halfway across the court, his hands cupped to his mouth. Andrew squinted, trying to make out Wymack’s expression. He looked really pissed, almost as pissed as Kevin.

Andrew leaned against the side of the goal and scratched the bridge of his nose with his extended middle finger.

“Sorry, Coach,” he yelled back, “Kevin told me to stop trying and start doing. He didn’t say what exactly I’m supposed to be doing!”

Kevin held the neck of his racquet in a death grip, his green eyes blazing. “I want you to guard the fucking goal! For fuck’s sake! That’s your job! GOALKEEPER. Why do you think you have a different color jersey?” From there Kevin’s rant devolved into French but Andrew had already checked out, staring blankly ahead while Kevin paced back and forth angrily.

“Okay! Kevin give it rest! I want you all to take five! We’ve got a game tomorrow, people!! Andrew Joseph Minyard! Take a lap! Renee, keep him company.” Wymack continued yelling commands to the team as Andrew headed for the outer circuit of the court. Renee hustled over and joined him. Instead of jogging, like Wymack had undoubtedly intended for them to do, they strolled.

Andrew pulled a knife out of his armband and casually sent it dancing across his knuckles, spinning in the air, palming it and switching hands and grips. Renee got it away from him a couple times, demonstrating her own considerable talent with the blade.

Eventually Renee broached the silence. “What’s going on with you today? You’re usually a bit more focused before games. Is your medication off?”

Andrew shrugged and balanced the bottom of the knife on his palm.

“How you heard back from Rain?”

Andrew shook his head. “Radio silence. Probably for the best.”

“You don’t mean that.”

Andrew kept quiet.

“You’re worried. It’s throwing you off your game.”

“Yeah, yeah, if I want to be psychoanalyzed I’ll go talk to Bee,” Andrew snarled. Renee wasn’t bothered and gave him a faint smile. “And my medications are fine, thank you very much for asking.”

“Okay,” Renee said. She stole his knife again.

They completed the lap and rejoined the team. Everyone was gathered around Wymack as he explained, for the umpteenth time, about their opponents’ strengths and weaknesses. Andrew remembered all the details from the first strategy meeting so he zoned out and went over his own strategy: Liberating Rain From Epic Asshole. It was a good plan.

“Alright, people! Are we clear? Everyone understand their jobs? Andrew? Andrew? ANDREW!”
Andrew blinked and gave Wymack his best dead-eyed stare. “Yes?”

Wymack scowled, unimpressed with his attitude. “C’mere, you blond bastard. The rest of you, get back out there! I want to decimate Breckenridge tomorrow night.”

Wymack waited until the rest of the team was on the field before turning to Andrew. “Same deal as last week, you get a bottle of your choice and you keep that goal on lock. Got it?”

“Sure.” Andrew managed a lazy grin. “Johnny Walker. And throw in some ice cream, too. Ben & Jerry’s.”

Wymack sighed and rubbed the back of his neck in exasperation. “You know I shouldn’t have to bribe you to get you to do your job. You’re on scholarship. A full ride, we’re practically paying you to play exy.”

“I do my time,” Andrew replied, stretching his arms out in preparation for getting back to practice. “Hours in the weight room, hours in practice, hours in games and travel, and all the untold time spent babysitting Kevin and listening to him obsess. The liquor just keeps me motivated. The ice cream keeps me all sweet and sociable.”

Wymack scoffed. “You’re never sweet and sociable. Now git! And try blocking the goal! I don’t want Kevin dying of an aneurysm from yelling at you!”

Andrew gave Wymack a two fingered salute and hustled back to the goal. He tried to trip up Aaron on the way, but Aaron dodged him.

For the next hour Andrew concentrated solely on practice, blocking every shot and returning the ball with such accuracy that Kevin actually complimented him, not that he cared. The team seemed excited, bolstered by his performance. Dan gave her usual pep talk and there was a lot of cheering. Nicky made lots of cocky boasts. Bets were placed. Plans were made.

“Okay, Eden’s tomorrow night,” Nicky announced, extending the invitation to the entire team. “We need to properly celebrate our victory.”

Seth said something obnoxious like “it’s gonna be fucking lit!” The girls were laughing about outfits. Aaron was texting and ignoring them all. Kevin had pulled Matt aside and was, again, talking about the game. Matt had a pained look on his face. Andrew shouldered his bag and pulled out his phone. He wasn’t surprised that he had no new messages but he still felt irritated and worried. Rain could be fucking dead. He probably wasn’t but it irked Andrew to not know, and it drove him a little insane that he cared so much about the welfare of a lying runaway. Bee told him that he was projecting his suppressed experiences and emotions onto Rain; Andrew hadn’t talked to her for the rest of their session.

They did not, in fact, decimate their opponents, but they did manage to win by two points, which Kevin scored back to back with a frantic display of athleticism that was impressive as fuck. Andrew had kept their goal locked down for the times that he was in the game. Renee missed a couple shots but she played like the champ she was. All told it had been a tight game and both sides had played hard. Breckenridge had resorted to some dirty tricks and trash talking, but the Foxes had kept their cool for the most part, responding by playing even harder and smarter. With each game the team was coming together, working together as a unit. It was largely due to Dan’s excellent captaincy and Kevin’s obsessive training. Despite their differences they were rallying around Dan’s mission to make them undefeated. Well, the other Foxes were rallying, Andrew was in it for the alcohol and the
less debilitating drugs that Wymack and Bee and Abby had advocated for. He would do anything to avoid taking those early medications, which had left him manic and empty and so fucking out of it that it was like being an entirely different person.

Andrew joined his teammates in the locker room. Everyone was loud and way too touchy feely, going for hugs and back slaps and chest bumps. Andrew ducked his way through the bodies and made for the showers. Nicky was singing some song in Spanish, getting way too into the chorus.

“God, shut up, Nicky!” Aaron yelled. Nicky just laughed and started the song over from the beginning.

Andrew stuck his head under the shower and drowned them all out. The water fell on his upturned face like rain. *Rain*. What a stupid name.

The ride down to Columbia was boisterous as usual. Andrew let Nicky DJ, his song choices on Fridays tending more towards dance remixes and electronica. Kevin was already buzzing and he was happily texting Thea play by plays. Aaron and Katelyn were trying to talk but since the music was so loud they had to practically yell directly into each others’ ears, not that they seemed to mind. Andrew focused on the road, enjoying the speed and the way everything blurred in the darkness. Buying this car was just about the best damn decision of his life.

After a quick stop at Sweetie’s for food they finally arrived at Eden’s. Andrew let everyone out and parked the car. The guys at the door let him in ahead of the line of other club goers, giving him a nod and congratulations on the game. Stepping into the club always gave Andrew a thrill, there was something electric and contagious about the combination of a dark room, flashing lights in synch with the DJ, a mass of dancing bodies, and the sweet promise of alcohol and maybe a release from his tension in the backroom with Roland or an equally accommodating guy.

Andrew spotted Kevin and Nicky; they had grabbed a table on the upper tier overlooking the dance floor. Renee and Matt and Dan were with them, Dan was already dancing with Matt. Some of the vixens had also joined their group, but the rest were probably dancing. Andrew made his way to the bar. Drinks first, fun after.

The bar was crowded as usual, Roland working with smooth efficiency at one end, an easy smile on his face as he passed out drinks and took money and cards. He looked good, even if he was wearing a shirt that was made more of holes than fabric. He was paying special attention to someone; Andrew couldn’t see who since the crowd blocked his view. Whoever it was made Roland laugh, his head tipped back. *Goddamn*. Roland poured the person a glass of Coke and pushed it across the bar. Andrew stood on his tiptoes and peered around the enormous guy standing in front of him only to see the back of the person’s head. He stopped dead, his pulse racing. Brilliant purple hair. *It couldn’t be.*

The guy at the bar turned to look at the crowd, glass in one hand, the other resting on the bar, too close to Roland’s arm. The guy was Rain. Undoubtedly. Except instead of wearing his fucking hippy shirts and ugly corduroys he was clad all in black: black skinny jeans, a skin-tight black long-sleeved shirt, black boots. He even had fucking black nail polish. Andrew felt an ugly emotion stirring in his chest as he watched Rain lean across the bar to whisper something to Roland. Roland laughed again and grabbed Rain’s hand and Rain let him, leaning in closer.

Andrew took a deep breath and counted down from ten, exhaling slowly. He knew Rain was a liar. He knew this. He knew that Rain had lied about working tonight. He shouldn’t be surprised. And yet. Here was Rain, in his place, talking to his hook-up partner, flirting even. Rain, who couldn’t be
bothered to call him all week. Andrew counted to ten again before approaching the bar.

Roland saw him coming and correctly read the emotion in Andrew’s eyes. He pulled his hand away from Rain and backed up, putting on his most impersonal expression. Rain looked confused, until Roland opened his mouth.

“Andrew! Good to see you. I saw Kevin and Nicky come in earlier. Y’all must have won.”

Andrew ignored Roland and stared at Rain who was gaping at him, his face suddenly pale and startled.

“Wha… what… what are you doing here?” Rain stammered.

Andrew was so furious he had to bury his fists into his pockets before he did something he regretted.

“I told you the team was partying tonight,” he drawled. He kept his tone even and bored. “If I remember correctly, you said you had to work.”

“Holy shit!” Roland interrupted, leaning across the bar, trying to get between them. “You two know each other?” He gave Andrew a look. “You always know the hot ones.”

“It’s not—” Rain interjected, “it’s not like that.”

Andrew was done. “Whatever. Roland, fix me the usual. We’re celebrating tonight.”

Roland gave him another lingering look but got to work mixing drinks. Andrew turned his back on Rain and pretended to watch the dancers.

“Andrew.” Rain’s voice was quiet and Andrew could only hear him because Rain was standing right behind him, speaking into his ear. “I’m sorry.”

Andrew ignored him, digging his fingernails into his palms. He was so close to snapping.

“Can I explain? Please, let me, ple—” Andrew didn’t give Rain the chance to finish saying the word. He spun around and clapped his palm over Rain’s mouth, his eyes flashing a warning. Rain went still, his black eyes opened wide, a faint blush rising on his cheeks. This close to him Andrew could see he was wearing concealer; it masked his freckles and, most likely, fresh bruises.

“Don’t,” Andrew hissed. They were standing so close that their knees touched, Andrew’s arm pressed to Rain’s chest; he could feel how hard Rain’s heart was beating. He took a calming breath and pulled his hand away and took a step back. “Don’t use that word around me.”

Rain nodded and bit his lip. He looked completely freaked out and Andrew hated it, despite everything, he hated that he had made Rain look like that.

“Meet me in the alley in five,” Andrew said. “You can explain.” Rain nodded again and then disappeared into the crowd. Andrew exhaled hard through his nose and turned back to the bar.

Roland was watching him with a careful lack of expression.

“What.” Andrew demanded.

“I didn’t say anything,” Roland said. “It’s not my business anyway.”

Andrew snorted. “Sure.”
“I wasn’t going to fuck him, in case you were wondering.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “I don’t believe you. And I don’t care.”

Roland laughed. He didn’t sound remotely amused. “I wasn’t saying that out of loyalty to you. He turned me down. So there.”

That made Andrew feel marginally better. “I’m not fucking him, either,” he said.

“Well. Good for you, I guess.” Roland finished loading up the tray and Andrew balanced it on one hand. “Let me know if you want to hook up later. I got a break in about an hour.”

Andrew thought about it. He was frustrated as hell but he wasn’t in a good place for that. He shook his head once and left to rejoin the Foxes.

Everyone greeted him enthusiastically, grabbing drinks and knocking them back. Renee took her Dr. Pepper and sipped at it, doing a little dance with Dan, both of them grinning and playfully making eyes at each other. Nicky was talking Kevin into dancing; the vixens were doing their best to help. Kevin’s eyes found Andrew, a silent query in them. Andrew scanned the crowded dance floor again and gave Kevin a nod. Kevin was safe tonight. Andrew would have a word with Matt and Nicky and make sure they stayed by Kevin while he went to find Rain.

Andrew took one of the shots and downed it, feeling the warmth rush into his gut. He would kill for a mixed drink but he needed to keep it together, as always; getting trashed simply wasn’t an option when he had the team to keep an eye on, when he had a frightened runaway to interrogate.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Andrew shouldered his way through the dancers and made it to alleyway exit. He eased the door open, careful to not make a sound. Rain was pacing in the alley, a lit cigarette held tightly between his fingers. Andrew stood in the shadows for a moment and watched him, watched the jittery way Rain brought the cigarette to his lips for a quick drag, the way he continually checked his surroundings, the way he kept his shoulders drawn up and his posture hunched. The tight fit of his dark clothing accentuated his slender build making him seem knife-like, sharp and dangerous. That purple hair kind of ruined the image, giving him a younger, softer look.

Andrew stepped out of the shadows and Rain nearly jumped out of his skin in surprise. It felt wrong: the clothes, the anxiety, the flirting at the bar. Something about the scared, rabbit look on Rain’s face made Andrew’s palms itch. Part of him wanted to slam Rain against the wall and demand answers and the other part wanted to beat Jason Fucking Reilly senseless. Andrew took a deep breath and pushed away both impulses. Rain was battered enough without having to deal with Andrew’s anger. Andrew pulled out his pack of cigarettes and lit up. He took a couple drags and waited for his aggression to bleed away and for his calm to return. Rain watched him, head tilted to the side, hands held loose and ready by his side.

After about a minute Andrew turned his full attention on Rain, stalking towards him. It was almost amusing the way Rain shrank from him, his back pressed firmly against the wall. Andrew crowded him but was careful not to touch. He took another pull on his cigarette and exhaled directly into Rain’s face, watching the way Rain’s eyes fluttered closed as he breathed in. When Rain opened his eyes there was a dazed sheen to them, he almost looked sleepy. His posture slumped into something more relaxed. Andrew placed one hand next to Rain’s head and closed the scant space between them, his lips almost brushing the shell of Rain’s ear.

“What part of this is working?” Andrew hissed.

Rain’s entire body shuddered and tensed. From this close Andrew could smell the lingering scent of incense in Rain’s hair. He could finally see the small tattoo behind his ear, a sugar skull done in black except for the red roses bursting from the eye sockets. The tattoo was about the size of a quarter, easily hidden. Andrew wanted to press his thumb over the tattoo, to run his fingers through Rain’s hair and see if it was as soft as it looked, to yank at his hair and hear what sounds he made. He didn’t do any of those things; instead he let his hand drop and took a step back, giving Rain space.

Rain wrapped his arms around himself and tucked his chin against his chest. When he spoke his voice was barely above a whisper.

“I am working,” he said and blew out a shaky breath. “I… I’m making some deliveries. Eden’s is my last stop I just, I just need to wait for my ride and then I can go back.”

The miserable look on his face said that Rain wasn’t happy to be here or to be going back.

“What kind of deliveries?” Andrew prodded.

Rain chewed at his lower lip and glanced around, confirming that they were alone. “What kind do you think, Andrew?” Rain gripped his biceps tighter.
“You tell me.”

“God, you’re being such an asshole,” Rain muttered. “Shit.” He leaned towards Andrew, the words a breathy whisper, “Drugs, of course.” He backed up and gave Andrew a considering look.

“You’re dealing?” Andrew couldn’t keep the scorn out of his voice. This was not what he was expecting. It could be worse but shit drug dealing? Not something he needed to be mixed up in.

“I’m not,” Rain corrected quickly. “I deliver them, from Jason to whoever is working in the different locations. I’m just the courier.”

“Okay.” Delivery boy wasn’t so bad. “Why are you doing it?”

Rain scoffed. “I don’t have a choice! Jason tells me to do something and I do it. You saw what happened, what he does. Believe me, I tried to say no but the first time I refused to do what he said…” Rain swallowed hard and pushed away from the wall and resumed pacing. “I came to the next day, bloody and bruised in the same fucking room where he beat the shit out of me. I was… incapacitated for days. And he didn’t give me any food, just water. Locked up in that bedroom with nothing but a bucket.” Rain clutched at the back of his neck and bent over, breathing hard.

Andrew watched, his face betraying none of what he was feeling. “You could leave.”

Rain laughed. “I can’t.”

“Why?”

Rain sighed and looked up at Andrew. “I made a bad fucking call, okay? Jason, he seemed legit when I met him, everyone said he was a good guy and he was offering steady work, a place to live, good pay. I took it.” Rain exhaled and scraped his fingers through his hair, making it a lovely mess. “But that motherfucker has connections. He found out who I am, who I’m running from. I leave him and he’ll sell me out. I mean, it’s possible I could make it but with no resources?” Rain shuddered and shook his head.

“So what you’re saying is that you’re that asshole’s bitch?” Rain winced at the words but nodded. “What else is he making you do?” Andrew asked. Rain shrugged but Andrew persisted. “Is he making you sell yourself?”

Rain looked stricken. “No! I mean, not really.”

“Not really? Because you looked really cozy with Roland.”

Rain laughed incredulously. “Did you know if you’re cute and friendly people give you stuff for free? I got a free Coke at the bar just from chatting and smiling at your friend Roland. I don’t swing. I just do what I have to.”

“Is that what’s happening with us?” Andrew demanded. “You’re just doing what you have to?” He crowded Rain again, staring him in the eyes. “Make sure you tell the truth this time, Rain.”

Rain’s breath hitched and the pulse in his neck jerked rapidly beneath his skin. His fingertips dug into the brick wall behind him as his breathing grew shallow. He licked his lips once before responding. “I don’t know what’s happening between us. I’m not trying to use you. I just… never mind.” Rain looked down, his voice hoarse. “Just leave, okay? Whatever you thought, I’m not worth it.”

Andrew couldn’t really argue with that. He knew very little about Rain, and what he did know
added up to the truth that Rain was indeed more trouble than he was worth. *He didn’t swing.* That
definitely took him out of the running for potential hook up partners. There was absolutely no benefit
in staying and yet Andrew couldn’t walk away. Maybe it was the way Rain was shaking or the
defeated tone when he admitted he wasn’t worth it. Maybe Rain was the world’s best actor, able to
slide from one persona to another, to spin sob stories on the spot, but somehow Andrew doubted it.
*God damn it.*

“Tell me why you gave me your number,” Andrew said. “Explain that for me, Rain.”

“Andrew.” He shouldn’t like the way his name sounded coming from Rain’s lips. He shouldn’t have
memorized the way it sounded. He shouldn’t be trying to place the accent Rain now had, his faux
southern lilt stripped away during the interrogation. “You’re the first person who’s treated me like a
human since… god, since I got here? Every person who comes in the store, they don’t care about me.
Why should they? I’m just the employee. Or they pay too much attention, they get obnoxious. I get
ignored or I get treated like a piece of meat. You’re the only one who tried to have a real
conversation with me.” Rain paused, looking to see if his words were getting through.

Andrew shifted away from him and shoved his hands in his pockets. If Rain was willing to dish out
this much truth then Andrew owed him a little in return.

“You misread me,” he admitted. “The second time I came to the smoke shop I was going to try to
pick you up. I already had the conversation planned out.” Rain frowned, his forehead creasing.
Andrew continued. “But then I saw the bruises and I realized that, as you put it, you would be more
trouble than you were worth. So I walked away.”

“Until you say Jason hitting me,” Rain interjected. He looked a little hopeful and Andrew didn’t
want to let him down.

“Yeah.”

“So what happens now?” Rain licked his lips nervously. He hadn’t moved away, hadn’t tried to
distance himself from Andrew now that he knew about his interest in him. Not that it really meant
anything, but still.

“What do you want to happen, Rain?” Andrew grabbed his cigarette pack again, giving his hands
something to do when all he really wanted was to press Rain against the wall and kiss him until his
lips were numb.

“I want you to stay.” There was a rawness in his tone that made Andrew’s gut twist. “I know that’s
unfair when I have nothing to offer.”

Andrew lit up and thought about it. He had enough burdens already resting on him but could he
really leave Rain in his shitty situation? Not fucking likely. He was already planning how to take
Reilly down; knowing that the guy was some sort of small time drug lord was extra motivation.
Andrew had no love for dealers, not after what Aaron and Matt and Seth had gone through.

“Don’t be so down on yourself,” Andrew said. “At the very least you’re nice to look at.” Rain
snorted. “And I’m sure you have one hell of a story to tell. Plus I already had a cop I know run your
boss’ plate.”

“You what?” There was real fear on Rain’s face. Panic. He moved to grab Andrew’s arm but
stopped, his fingers trembling.

“Relax. The cop is in California. I didn’t bother anyone local.”
“Oh. Oh thank god.” Rain slumped against the wall. The damn wall was getting way too much Rain contact. “He’s got people on the force. He’s got people everywhere. The last courier got arrested. Reilly told me the girl was going to testify in exchange for a deal. Needless to say her ‘suicide’ was not self-inflicted.” He shivered.

“Well. Shit.” Andrew chewed on that information. Maybe Reilly wasn’t as small time as he thought. “We need to plan. Can you ever get away? Maybe for a night?”

“Possibly?” Rain bit the inside of his cheek. “I think that Jason’s going to be out of town next weekend. He’s supposed to go to Atlanta to meet with his boss. So yeah, after I close up the shop on Saturday I’ll be free.” He actually smiled at Andrew then. Bright, hopeful. It was like being impaled.

“Great,” Andrew mumbled. “We should probably go back in now. Your driver coming to get you soon?”

“Uh, let me check.” Rain pulled out his phone and scanned his messages. “He’s on his way.” He sighed and rubbed his hands over his arms even though the South Carolina night was oppressively warm.

“I’ll come by the shop this week,” Andrew said, giving in to the impulse to stay close to Rain even though it wouldn’t get him anything. “I’m running low on cigarettes. And Nicky wants to scope out the porn section again.”

Rain laughed. “God. Well, we did get some new stuff in. And, uh, you can tell Kevin that we now have body pillows.”

“He’ll be thrilled, I’m sure.” Andrew stared at Rain, longer than was comfortable. But Rain maintained the eye contact, a pink flush rising on his cheeks. “Next weekend,” Andrew murmured, “when you’re with me, don’t wear your contacts.”

Rain’s blush was instant and dramatically red. He stammered for a few moments before managing a quiet, “Okay.”

—–

Later that night, after Andrew had driven his extremely drunken teammates back to the house, he had time to work his way through a bottle of dessert vodka and think about what Rain had said. He had so many questions: who was Rain running from? What did he mean when he said he only “sort of” sold himself? Who was being obnoxious to him? What sort of operation did Reilly have? Was there a chance that getting involved would bring trouble to Kevin and Aaron and Nicky? Could he really take that sort of a risk for Rain, whoever the fuck Rain really was?

Aaron padded out into the kitchen, blinking at the bright fluorescent light.

“You going to bed?” he mumbled as he opened the fridge and got out the milk.

“Probably not.” Andrew tipped more vodka into his empty glass. He knew that if he stood up he would finally feel the affects of the alcohol, but right now he just felt comfortably numb.

“What’s going on?” Aaron settled down at the table and took a swig directly from the milk jug. *Fucking heathen.*

“I am weighing the value of one man’s life against yours,” Andrew responded, knocking back the shot glass.
Aaron grunted sleepily. “How philosophical of you.” He yawned and scratched at his stomach.

“I won’t break my promise,” Andrew said, more to assure himself than Aaron.

“I know.” Aaron stood and put the milk back. He stretched and mumbled a quiet goodnight before leaving.

Andrew put his head down on the table, phone gripped in one hand. As he drifted to sleep he thought about Rain’s blushing face and his slender silhouette. He had to remind himself that in reality Rain was untouchable but his dreams weren’t so hands off.

Chapter End Notes

Can I just say? This update was a Struggle! And I am now realizing how much planning I need to do for future chapters. Apologies if you started this fic and thought "LOL! Supernatural porn and hentai!" because, sorry to say, the drama has taken over.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

FYI: this update includes a hostile “discussion” of Andrew’s sexuality and also verbal sexual harassment. If you see something else that should be listed let me know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Did he really say there would be body pillows?” Kevin was practically glued to the back of Andrew’s seat, hands grasping the headrest. His voice was loud and way too excited and right in Andrew’s ear. Andrew smacked Kevin on the forehead, grumbling about personal space. Aaron, who was riding in the passenger seat, smirked but otherwise ignored them.

“I want a body pillow, too,” Nicky jumped in. “Like maybe one of… oh God there are too many choices. Okay, top five guys I would want as a body pillow: Chris Hemsworth, Sebastian Stan, Kevin Day—” Nicky yelped when Kevin hit him. Nicky coughed and then started laughing. “You are so easy to tease, Day. I love it! Okay, so Dwayne Johnson—”

“You’ll need a bigger pillow,” Andrew drawled.


“Sounds like a law firm,” Aaron muttered.

“A damn fine law firm! I would love for them to do some litigation for me.” Nicky did a ridiculous eyebrow dance which Andrew had the misfortune of glimpsing in the rear view mirror.

Andrew didn’t join in Nicky’s enthusiastic comparisons of his favorite celebrities. Instead he turned up the music and thought about Rain. He was pretty in his own way; maybe not Hollywood pretty but he turned heads, especially at Eden’s. Andrew had watched him move through the crowd, easily weaving around dancers, grinning whenever someone tried to get him to dance or offered him a drink. By the time he had reached the club entrance he had, as far as Andrew could tell, collected a couple numbers and been groped by several drunk guys and girls. It made Andrew feel a burn of unwarranted possessiveness, like a mental heartburn he couldn’t shake. Before he left Rain had scanned the club for Andrew and, after catching his eye, smiled jauntily and nodded, almost like a bow before ducking out the door. Andrew hadn’t heard a word from Rain since then. It was Wednesday and Andrew could only imagine the shit that might have gone down.

“Hey.” Aaron spoke just loud enough for Andrew to hear him but not Nicky and Kevin who were arguing about who the hottest exy player was (Kevin insisted it was Jeremy Knox). “Why did you ask me to come along? Liquor runs are usually you and Kevin’s thing.”

Andrew gripped the steering wheel, body tensed. He wasn’t ready to have this conversation with Aaron, probably never would be.

“I invited someone to the house,” he admitted.

Aaron’s eyes widened. “Seriously? You never invite people. I wasn’t aware that you even knew
anyone outside of the team.”

Andrew scoffed. “Just because we’re twins…”

“…doesn’t mean we have to tell each other everything,” Aaron finished. “God, I know. I know. But still… I’m surprised.”

Andrew shrugged. “It’s not really a thing. But I want your second opinion. If you shut it down then I won’t ask him over.”

“Him?” Aaron’s voice cracked on the word.

“Problem?”

Aaron exhaled and rubbed his palms over his jeans. “Shit.” He glanced back at Nicky and Kevin, then at Andrew. His frown, the sheer expressiveness of face, was the one tell that set the twins apart. “I don’t know, Andrew.”

“What don’t you know, Aaron? Him, her, them. It’s just people. We’re not fucking religious or anything so why the fuck are you acting like this is a big fucking deal?”

“Swear much?” Aaron muttered. He huffed and bit his lip. “It’s… you’re right. I just assumed… for years. You never set me straight.”

Andrew actually laughed. “Set you straight? You’re plenty straight enough for both of us. Besides, I don’t owe you shit. What I do in my life is my business. I only asked you as a courtesy, because we have a deal to look after each other.”

“Except you never let me look after you! And now I find out you’re gay?” Aaron hissed the last word, a whisper. He made sure that Nicky and Kevin didn’t hear. “What the hell, Andrew. We’re family, brothers, twins. I should have known before this, before you make me meet some guy you want to—”

Andrew jabbed his finger at Aaron’s face, his eyes flashing a warning. “If you don’t have anything nice to say, Aaron, shut your fucking mouth.”

Aaron threw his hands up in frustration. “Why do I even bother? Do what you want Andrew. You’ve seen what happens, with Nicky. Do you really want that drama in your life?”

“If you recall, I took care of Nicky.”

“Yeah? After he got the shit beat out of him. And you screwed yourself in the process. So excuse me if this revelation is stressing me the fuck out.”

“How the hell is this about you?” Andrew could not believe that the conversation had devolved so quickly. Actually, he could. He just couldn’t believe that it was happening as a whisper fight while he had his cousin and roommate in the backseat of his car.

Aaron kept his mouth shut and crossed his arms over his chest, slouching down in the seat like a petulant child.

“Silent treatment? Real mature, bro.”

“You said,” Aaron growled, “to keep my mouth shut if I had nothing good to say.”

Andrew shook his head and turned the music up even louder. He was perversely pleased when the
next song aptly summed up his mood. *Fuck you anyway.* Aaron flipped him off and then ignored him, focusing on his phone like it was the only thing he cared about.

Nicky seemed to pick up on the mood and was giving Andrew and Aaron concerned looks while Kevin remained oblivious, scrolling away on his phone, probably drooling over his gallery of Jeremy Knox pictures.

By the time they reached the strip mall Andrew’s mood had soured so completely that he wanted to abandon his passengers and drive aimlessly until the *feelings* subsided. Instead he parked in front of the liquor store and gave the others instructions on what to buy for the next victory celebration. He headed over to Pipe Dream on his own.

His shitty luck continued because Rain was not alone. Three guys were clustered around the counter. One of them, a large frat bro type that Andrew thought he might have seen on campus, was leaning way over the counter. Andrew moved quietly, sneaking closer. Rain, who was nearly hidden behind the tall men, hadn’t seen him come in and the door chime was drowned out by the hideous jam band music. As he got nearer Andrew saw an assortment of sex toys spread out on the counter.

“Why don’t you tell me about this one?” The guy asked, holding up a large sparkling pink dildo. The way he was pointing it at Rain, the leer on his face, made Andrew feel sick.

“I’m sorry,” Rain said, not sounding sorry at all. “But as you can see, there are instructions on the label. My job is not to tell you how to use any of these items, I only ring them up.”

“Sure,” the guy smirked and winked like Rain was just teasing him. “Actually, what I—what we—really want to know is how you would take this. Cause I’m thinking, you know, with some of this lube y’all sell and maybe those kinky restraints—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish. Just as Andrew was about to intervene and kick the douche bag’s ass Rain made his move. He snatched the toy out of the man’s hand, holding it like a weapon.

“You want to know how I’d take it?” Rain’s accent sounded extra southern and sultry. The guy was leaning in even more, like he couldn’t get close enough. He licked his lips; the expression on his face was obscene. “I’d take it just like that and then I would shove it so far down your fucking throat that you choked. I’d watch your face turn purple while you gurgled your last breaths away, tasting plastic on your tongue. Then I’d bury your body where not even God himself could find it, leaving you with this shiny, pink present in your esophagus. Your body would decompose but this,” he jabbed the toy at the man’s face, “wouldn’t. So one day all that would be left of you would be your bones and this,” Rain waved the dildo back and forth in front of the man’s face.

The man had gone pale. His friends backed up several steps. All of them looked shell-shocked. Andrew grinned. Rain’s approval rating had just gone through the fucking roof. He thought of the phrase “frightened yet aroused.”

“Now,” Rain said, in perfect polite tones, “will this be all for you today?”

The man shook his head and stumbled back, nearly falling as he tripped over his feet. His friends followed him as he dashed to the door. Once they were safely outside the man shouted several obscenities and slurs but Rain only smiled and waved. His bravado vanished as soon as the men had driven away. Rain slumped against the counter, his arms crossed over the pile of toys, his forehead resting on his arms. Andrew watched as a shudder ran through Rain’s body. It was time to make his presence known.

Andrew scuffed his shoes loudly on the floor and cleared his throat. Rain shot up in a panic but
relaxed a little when he saw Andrew.

“God, you scared me,” Rain said, hand resting over his heart. “I swear I thought it was—” He shut up and gave Andrew a quick once over. “Well, I’m glad it’s you. Did you hear all of, all of that?”

Andrew nodded. “You have a fucked up imagination, Rain.”

Rain shrugged and swept all the toys into a basket. “C’mon,” he said to Andrew. “I gotta put this merch back before Jason returns or the next asshole wants to get his rocks off by propositioning me.”

Andrew followed Rain into the backroom, wrinkling his nose at the pornographic posters and the scent of desperation. The room was lit by pink and red light bulbs because apparently it wasn’t enough to sell sex toys, you had to also market a cheap, red light district vibe. Rain started putting things back on their shelves, straightening and sighing.

“I’ve learned more than I ever wanted to about sex stuff since I started working here,” Rain observed. “Never had any interest and honestly? All of this is one hell of a turn off.”

Andrew eyed the display of cuffs and shivered. “So you can get turned on?”

Rain shot him a pointed look. “How is that your business?”

“You brought it up,” Andrew replied. He kept his hands shoved in his pockets, both to keep himself from touching Rain and to avoid contact with the objects that had probably been pawed over by guys without good hygiene practices.

Rain avoided answering and finished replacing the items. Andrew checked out the body pillows. There wasn’t a single Chris amongst them; Nicky would be disappointed. Kevin, however, would be quite pleased by the anime pillows.

Rain left the rose tinted room and Andrew followed him. The shop itself felt less oppressive compared to the porn room. Under the bright lights Andrew took a moment to examine Rain. He looked mostly unscathed. The bruise on his face had nearly faded away but there was a new one on his jaw and a suspiciously oval-shaped bruise on his neck. His nail beds, Andrew noticed, were ragged and bloody.

“We still on for Friday?” Andrew asked. He stood by the counter, careful not to get too close since Rain still looked a little jumpy.

“Yeah, I worked it out with my driver. He thinks I’m hooking up with someone. You know, ‘while the cat’s away.’” He tried to smile but failed. He was picking at his cuticles, tearing into the skin and drawing blood.

“How long has he had you making deliveries?”

“About a month now. God, I can’t even believe it’s been, what, almost two months since I came here,” Rain shook his head, looking more exhausted than ever.

“Where did you meet him?” Rain had said that it was a long story, the path that had led him here, but Andrew would take what insights he could get to tide him over.

“Bonnaroo.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow at that.
“C’mon,” Rain said, smiling in a way that was almost flirty. “You shouldn’t be surprised.” He plucked at his shirt, this time a trippy galaxy with Disco Biscuits on the front.

“I thought it was all an act,” Andrew said. “I didn’t think you were an actual hippy.”

Rain pushed his fingers through his hair, scratching at the skin behind his ear where he had the tiny skull tattoo. “It is what it is. I’ve been trotting the globe for years, crashing in communes and at farms, never staying in one place too long. Met some really great people.”

“Until you met the wrong one.”

“Yeah.” The word was a whisper, tinged with regret and pain.

It was at that moment, when Andrew felt like he was finally getting somewhere that the rest of the guys showed up. Nicky was talking loudly, telling Aaron, for what was probably the umpteenth time, about just how supernaturally good the Supernatural porn was. Aaron looked like he was about to murder his cousin. Kevin nodded to Rain and Andrew and headed to the back; Nicky followed him. Aaron walked towards the counter looking pissed.

Rain’s eyes looked about ready to pop out of his skull.

“Holy shit!” he gasped. “There are two of you?”

“That’s how twins work, genius,” Aaron snarled. He glanced at Andrew. “Looks like I’m not the only one my brother likes to leave in the dark.”

Chapter End Notes

On a personal note: when I was in college I was obsessed with hippie culture and I desperately wanted to go to Bonnaroo and Burning Man. I had lots of tie dye shirts, incense, and listened to freak folk all the damn time. I also had a guitar that I never learned to play. I still own a broken VW bug that lives with my brother.
Andrew watched as Rain’s eyes flicked back and forth between him and Aaron, watched as the walls went up. Great.

“Rain, this is my brother, Aaron. Aaron, Rain.”

Aaron was sneering, the expression ugly and antagonistic. This was Aaron the Asshole, not Aaron the Usually Withdrawn and Socially Awkward. Andrew typically found his twin’s asshole persona to be amusing, not so much when it was directed at Rain.

“Hey,” Rain said, his southern accent coming on strong. He held out his hand but Aaron just stared at it. Rain shrugged and flashed Aaron the peace sign. “Not a shaker? No worries, man. Do you play exy, too?”

It was a smart move, demonstrating yet again that Rain knew how to work people, talk to them and make them feel comfortable. He was playing his role of chill stoner hippy boy to perfection. And he was taking the revelation of Andrew having a twin in stride.

Aaron blinked, his posture relaxing. “Uh. Yeah. I’m a backliner.”

“Cool, cool. How’s your season going? Which teams have you played?”

Aaron stumbled over the answer, explaining how they were undefeated so far. Rain kept the questions focused on exy, on the team, before guiding it back to Aaron. He wasn’t giving Aaron time to ask him any questions but he was quietly gleaning more and more information about Aaron and his teammates. Aaron was now telling Rain about his girlfriend Katelyn. He actually pulled out his phone to show him pictures. Rain was all smiles and charm. The only time Andrew saw Aaron hesitate and start to shut down was when he finally noticed the bruises and scars. He glanced at Andrew and there was the look of understanding that made Andrew feel defensive and angry. He didn’t want or need Aaron’s pity.

Andrew left them talking and wandered around the shop, taking in more details, looking for clues of Jason Fucking Reilly’s real business. Other than an overabundance of security cameras and the locked door leading to the back he didn’t come across anything else that looked suspicious.

He worked his way back towards the counter, moving quietly so he could once again eavesdrop on the Rain’s conversation.

It seemed like Aaron had finally remembered why he was meeting Rain in the first place. He was supposed to be assessing Rain, not giving up his entire life story.

“So, are you gay?” Andrew tensed at the blunt question, delivered with a simmering hint of menace. *Shit.*

“Excuse me?” Rain stammered.

“Are you gay. Because Andrew is. And if you break his heart I will break your face.” Aaron’s arms were crossed over his chest and he was using every inch of his five-foot frame to project hostility. Andrew clenched his fists and fought down the impulse to smack Aaron. Or to gag him.
“Uh. I think you don’t understand,” Rain started. “It’s not like that between me and your brother. And I’m not gay.” He was getting worked up, his black eyes flashing. “Also,” Andrew had to strain to hear Rain, who was almost whispering. “It is 100% wrong to out someone like that! Especially your brother. Seriously, man, not cool.”

“I wasn’t—I thought you knew.” Aaron was blushing, looking embarrassed and worried.

“Yeah, I knew but you shouldn’t have assumed that I knew! You haven’t been blabbing this to everyone, have you?”

“No! God, no, I just… I just found out like thirty minutes ago.”

“Well, good. Because if Andrew wants people to know he should be the one to tell them, not you.” Andrew was surprised by Rain’s vehement defense.

A heavy, awkward silence settled between them. Andrew could feel the tension radiating between them, the easy camaraderie shattered by Aaron’s ill-conceived attempt to be a protective brother. "This Andrew thought bitterly is why you don’t tell people your shit. He grabbed an ashtray at random and walked up to the counter.

Aaron flinched when Andrew sidled up next to him.

“Good talk?” he asked mildly.

Aaron nodded mutely, his face pale. He excused himself to go see what Nicky was doing. Andrew set the ashtray down and studied Rain. The guy was as much of an enigma as ever but his brain kept replaying his words “I’m not gay.” He knew that Rain claimed to “not swing” but somehow he had unconsciously been holding out hope. Not anymore.

Rain picked up the ashtray and snorted.

“What.”

“I’m just—I can’t believe you picked this one.” Rain held it in his palm and tilted it so Andrew could read the words painted in the bowl: *Let’s make like a hippie and blow this joint*. Peace signs and marijuana leaves decorated the outside of the bowl. It wasn’t the tackiest thing that Andrew had ever seen but it was close. Nicky would love it.

“Hmm. Probably shouldn’t give this one to coach.”

Rain grinned and rung up the ashtray and a pack of cigarettes. “Yeah, probably not.”

Kevin appeared at Andrew’s elbow, his arms full of merch that he unloaded on the counter. His cheeks were flushed, ears bright pink with embarrassment. Rain started ringing up the goods, keeping his mouth shut though he smiled a little at the body pillow.

“Wait a minute.” Andrew hauled the body pillow over and picked it up. It was as tall as him, pretty wide too, but— “Is that Dante?”

Kevin nodded his head way too enthusiastically. “Yeah! Check out the other side.”

Andrew flipped the pillow only to find Vergil stretched out in a rather lurid pose, his pants undone, his shirt missing and his blue jacket open revealing the video game perfect abs and chest. Dante was similarly attired and posed, though in black leather pants and his red jacket. As for their swords… well…
“Do you have a twin fetish that I need to know about?” Andrew asked. Nicky, who was waiting behind Kevin, choked.

Kevin’s blush intensified. “No! No, no, I uh just like both of them? Doesn’t everyone like both of them?” He looked frantically at the guys before pulling the pillow away from Andrew and hugging it to his chest. “Whatever,” he sulked.

The register beeped as Rain rung up the rest of Kevin’s purchases. Andrew, who wasn’t done tormenting Kevin, grabbed the DVD before Kevin could protest.

“Lust in the Locker Room?” Kevin lunged for Andrew but Andrew neatly evaded him, moving to put Aaron between them. “And it’s exy porn. God, they really hit all your buttons with this one, Day."

“Oh, shut up!” Kevin snapped. “I’ve got to be around you assholes all day, I need some happiness in my life.”

“Don’t worry, Kevin,” Nicky assured him, “I got the Lord of the Rings porn. You can totally borrow it anytime.”

“You guys know that the Internet exists, right?” Aaron muttered.

“Of course! What are your favorite sites, Aaron?” Aaron went beet red and refused to answer. He left the shop immediately and pulled out his phone, probably calling Katelyn to complain about them. Kevin and Nicky followed Aaron out, joking about different geek-themed porn.

And then it was Andrew and Rain alone.

Rain plucked at his cuticles again, biting at the torn skin, his eyes following Kevin and Nicky as they loaded their purchases in Andrew’s car and lounged on the hood.

“You’re putting them in danger by trying to help me,” Rain murmured. “You should walk away.”

“Tell me about the mark on your neck,” Andrew replied.

Rain touched the bruise, his fingers shaking. He swallowed hard and avoided Andrew’s gaze.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” He looked sick.

Andrew sighed. “I know. That’s why I’m not walking away, Rain. Too many people walk away and pretend they don’t see a problem just because it’s not their problem. I’m not one of those people.”

Rain bit down on his thumb, his eyes watering. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine. I can figure this out—”

Andrew grabbed Rain’s wrist, pulled his hand away from his mouth and studied the deep bite marks on his knuckle.

“I don’t think you can. Come to the house this weekend. We’ll talk. We’ll plan.”

Rain swallowed again but didn’t try to pull out of Andrew’s grasp. For a moment his eyes looked truly dead, heavy. It was disturbingly like looking at his own face in the mirror.

“Look,” Andrew pitched his voice low, causing Rain to lean closer to hear. “I have been in some fucked up situations. Whatever you’re running from, whatever mess you’re in here, it’s not going to shock me. It’s not going to be too much for me to handle. Have some faith, Rain.”
Rain studied Andrew’s face, testing his words. “I think,” he said, “you would be surprised at how epically fucked I am. But sure, we can talk.” He waved his free hand between them, a sad smile on his lips. “It’s all a pipe dream, anyway.”

“I’m not a hallucination,” Andrew countered. He released Rain’s arm, fingertips trailing his wrist briefly.

Leaving the shop, leaving Rain stranded in a bad place, hurt on a physical level. Although he put a brave face on it, Rain was falling apart. The compulsive tearing at his nails, the dark bags under his eyes, that damn bite mark on his throat that hadn’t been there Friday night…

The ride back to campus was just as loud and boisterous as the previous trip but Andrew tuned it all out, ignored Kevin and Nicky’s discussion of porn tropes, ignored Aaron’s calculating stare. He only had a few days to come up with some solutions to offer Rain, tentative plans. Or he could just kill Jason Fucking Reilly. Surely the man had enemies, people who would want him dead. Andrew knew how to stage a crime scene. If Rain worked with him they could make it happen. They could make him disappear. Permanently.

“Andrew, are you smiling?” Kevin asked.

Andrew looked in the rearview mirror. He was smiling.

“Dude, stop. It’s creepy as fuck,” Kevin added.

Andrew gave Kevin the finger but he didn’t stop grinning.

Chapter End Notes

Hey y'all! Sorry that this update isn't very long. I promise next week's will be very long because *whew* these boys have a lot of ground to cover.
Despite Aaron’s misgivings Andrew brought Rain to the Columbia house for the weekend. But first he had to endure hours at Eden’s Twilight. While his teammates drank like there was no tomorrow and danced like they were getting paid for it, Andrew had maintained his spot at the edge of the balcony overlooking the dance floor. From there he could keep track of Aaron, Kevin, Nicky and, more importantly, Rain. He sipped at a glass of whiskey on the rocks feeling a million years old while the rest of the club devolved into drunken and drugged out chaos.

Rain was wearing a different club outfit this week: skin tight jeans that rode low on his hips and a loose black top that Rain spent almost the entire night trying to keep from falling off his shoulders every two seconds. Someone had painted his exposed arms with glowing lines and patterns, his face was painted too, a masquerade style mask around his eyes and over his nose, his lips a bright, garish green. Streaks of paint had been mussed into his purple hair. Obviously this had been done at another club and Andrew had to wonder who had painted Rain and if Rain had consented to it in the first place. He had a sneaking suspicion that the answer was “no.”

The outfit and the paint drew more attention to Rain and he was getting bombarded with requests and handsy come ons. Nicky joined Andrew for a minute, downing a couple shots and a glass of water. His shirt was damp with sweat, the ends of his hair dripping onto his collar. Andrew wrinkled his nose in faint distaste before beckoning Nicky over.

“Rain needs some help,” he said, pointing out where Rain had gotten stuck in between two very aggressive girls who apparently thought he was a stripper pole. Rain had his hands held rigidly at his sides, his eyes darting around like he was plotting an escape. Both girls towered over him by at least half a foot and they had the builds to match.

Nicky laughed hysterically when he saw Rain.

“Oh my god!!! Look at him! Damn. GET IT RAIN!!” Nicky yelled loud enough that Rain actually heard him, his gaze seeking them out and landing on Andrew. Help me! he mouthed, looking stricken.

“Quit being an asshole, Nicky, go fetch him or dance with him, I don’t fucking care.”

“Oh, I’ll dance with him alright!” Nicky grinned and then took off down the stairs, nearly falling when he tripped. Andrew shook his head. These idiots.

The song changed and Nicky made his way to Rain, smiling hugely at the two girls who had glommed onto Rain and didn’t look willing to let him go without a fight. Rain beamed at Nicky and said something to the girls. Whatever it was must have shocked them because they were making the most exaggerated expressions of surprise. Andrew leaned over the railing, as if he would actually be able to hear them from his vantage point. The meaning of Rain’s statement soon became clear when he grabbed the front of Nicky’s shirt, pulled him down, and kissed him soundly on the mouth. Nicky more than played along, scooping Rain up and kissing him like they were in a damn romantic comedy. Both girls were gaping. Aaron, who had been dancing nearby with Katelyn, finally noticed and frowned, looking around the club until he found Andrew watching. Andrew met Aaron’s gaze and shrugged.

Moments later Nicky brought Rain up to see Andrew. They were both sweaty and panting, Rain’s face flushed bright pink. He nodded at Andrew and clapped Nicky on the back.
“Thanks for the assist, man,” Rain said. “Those girls would not take no for answer.” He shivered and shook himself, like he could get rid of the memory of their bodies pressed against his.

“Oh baby, it was my pleasure,” Nicky cooed. He winked at Rain and blew him a kiss. “Now, if y’all will excuse me, Kevin is breaking out some real nice moves up by the stage and I cannot miss my chance to get a little Day action.”

Rain waved bye and watched as Nicky tripped down the stairs and into the crowd. Finally he turned to look at Andrew. Some of his bravado slipped and Andrew caught a glimpse of the boy beneath the paint and party clothes. The paint on Rain’s arms was smeared and if there had been a pattern or a design it was long gone. Andrew felt a fierce stab of jealousy, misplaced and unwarranted, dangerous. It made him want to do things he shouldn’t do, wouldn’t do. He replayed Rain’s words: “I’m not gay.” Just because he was helping Rain didn’t mean that Rain owed him anything, least of all that.

“Busy night?” Andrew asked.

Rain bobbed his head, the club lights flashing across his skin, cool blues and greens, hot red, warm orange, brilliant pink and purple. Rain moved closer so he wouldn’t have to shout, stopping when he was only a few inches away from Andrew.

“I had to go to a rave earlier.” He swiped at the paint on his arms, holding up his fingers to show Andrew.

Andrew gave him a bored look. “So I noticed.”

“Yeah, well, it made Eden’s look tame.” Rain surveyed the crowd, his eyes restless, anxious. Andrew reached out and brushed his fingers along Rain’s jaw before guiding his face back to him. Rain blinked, his black eyes looked huge. “Sorry, I got distracted.” He bit his bottom lip, eyes flickering from Andrew’s eyes to his lips and back up. He looked uncertain for a moment and then he was moving forward, closing the gap between them, his eyes half-closed…

Andrew realized a second before it happened that Rain was going to kiss him. There was the slightest pressure of Rain’s lips against his own before Andrew pushed him back. Rain gripped the balcony railing to stop himself from falling, his face betraying hurt and confusion.

“Don’t touch me,” Andrew snarled. He sucked in several deep breaths, tamping down on his anger and aggression. *Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck.*

Rain moved several steps backward, palms held up and out like he was afraid that Andrew might hit him. “I’m sorry,” Rain gasped, still retreating. “I’m so, so sorry. Fuck. Dude, I’m really sorry—”

“Stop,” Andrew hissed, hands curled into tight fists. “Stop saying that fucking word.”

“What?” Rain’s eyes were enormous and scared. *Shit.*

“Stop saying ‘sorry.’” He took a deep breath, turning from Rain and grabbing another drink. “Why did you do that?”

“I thought… I thought you wanted me to…” Rain stammered, his hands fidgeted and he clutched uselessly at his front pockets that, in pants that tight, were sewn shut.

“I didn’t. If I want you to kiss me I’ll tell you. Didn’t anyone ever teach you to ask before you touch?”
Rain looked close to tears and he wrapped his paint-smeared arms over his chest, hugging himself. “Yeah.” His voice was quiet, almost lost beneath the pounding music. “I think I forgot. These last few months…” He shuddered. “Nothing is ever free, okay? I thought you wanted me. I thought you would want this in exchange—”

“I don’t expect anything from you in exchange,” Andrew snapped. “That’s not how this works. I’m helping you because I want to.”

“So you don’t want me?” Rain’s shirt was falling off his shoulders, revealing more scars, hideous and vivid beneath the flashing lights. Andrew’s childhood had been beyond fucked up but seeing those scars he had to wonder: what had Rain survived? What had he done in order to survive?

“Rain.” Andrew used every bit of his patience to stop himself from grabbing Rain and shaking him. “Whether I want you or not is irrelevant. What matters, what always matters, is what you want. Did you want to kiss me? Did you want to be kissed? If the answer to those questions is ‘no’ then don’t fucking initiate something. And if it’s ‘yes’ then you ask first.” Andrew glowered at Rain, frustrated beyond belief by this beautiful, confused, messed up boy.

“Okay.”

That was it. Just “okay.” Andrew huffed and slid a drink across the table to Rain. It was one of Renee’s sodas, unfinished with a silvery lipstick mark on the lip of the glass. Rain accepted it and drank, leaving his own mark of glowing green paint.

“Did I fuck everything up?” Rain asked, his eyes downcast.

“Of course not, you idiot. As long as you don’t touch me without my permission we won’t have any problems.” That was overly optimistic but saying anything harsher would probably send Rain running.

“Good,” Rain’s smile was small but relieved. “Thank you. I promise I won’t do that again. Do you think I need to apologize to Nicky?”

Andrew shook his head. “No, it looked like he enjoyed that a bit too much for a guy with a boyfriend.”

Rain blanched. “Oh shit… is he gonna get in trouble? Aww man, I am ruining everything tonight! This is why I don’t drink!”

“Calm down,” Andrew said, his tone more exasperated than reassuring. “Nicky’s boyfriend lives in Germany and I think, under the circumstances, he would understand. What did you say to those girls anyway?”

“Well, Nicky came up and was like ‘Darling, I’ve been looking everywhere for you!’ So I just played along and when the girls didn’t believe that I was gay I grabbed Nicky and kissed him.” Rain flushed and fanned himself. “He’s a very good kisser.”

Andrew did not need to know that about his cousin. “You told them you were gay?”

Rain shrugged. “I mean you do what you gotta do.”

“Do you ever tell the truth?”

“I’ll tell you.” Rain’s gaze was so direct and piercing that Andrew could almost feel it. Truth, it seemed, was Rain’s sacrifice. He had offered up a kiss as a method of payment and Andrew had
turned that down but truth—that was golden. Andrew would take all he could get.

Back at the house Kevin and Nicky slumped off to one of the bedrooms, both of them wasted and ragged, sweaty and yawning. Aaron and Katelyn took another room, sharing quiet smiles and holding hands in a disgusting display of affection. Andrew snagged Rain’s shirt and pulled him into the living room. Rain looked so tired that for a moment Andrew felt guilty about keeping him up. But then he remembered what Rain might have been facing if he had returned to Jason’s. They had a limited amount of time to talk and to plan; now wasn’t the time for pity or rest.

Rain scanned the living room, taking in the sparse furnishings and decorations. Andrew had thrown out a lot of stuff after Tilda was gone but he hadn’t replaced any of it. The room had the same appearance as a hotel, lacking a truly lived in vibe.

“This is nice,” Rain said, his voice cautious.

Andrew snorted. “It’s not but thanks for trying.”

Rain blinked sleepily and yawned. He plucked at his sweaty, painted smeared clothes. “Umm, can I get cleaned up first before we do this? I don’t want to get paint all over your stuff.”

Andrew stared at him for a moment, his mind conjuring up unhelpful scenarios of how Rain could get paint all over his “stuff.” He blinked and refocused. “Sure, let me get you a towel and a change of clothes.”

Andrew went to his bedroom and retrieved a pair of sweatpants and a large shirt that Bee had given him, it had little foxes all over it, definitely not his style but he wore it sometimes when he was at home.

Rain took the clothes and disappeared into the bathroom. While he showered Andrew made a pot of coffee and ate some of Nicky’s mint chocolate chip ice cream. Since Andrew hadn’t danced he was still fairly clean, though he smelled like he had been in a club for the past five hours.

By the time Rain rejoined him Andrew was halfway through the pint of ice cream and feeling more relaxed than he had in weeks, since before he met Rain. For the moment all of his people were safe and under his roof. His calm was shattered by Rain appearing in the doorway to the kitchen, his dark hair wet and tousled, the sweatpants hanging off his slender hips and that damn fox t-shirt looked like it had been made just for him. Andrew felt his pulse jump and he clamped down on the tremor that shook through him. Damn it.

“Is that mint chocolate chip?!” Rain asked, looking way too eager. “Can I have some?”

Andrew shoved the pint into his hands, giving him a fresh spoon while he excused himself to go take a shower. He was in the shower for quite a long time.
“C’mon,” Andrew padded into the kitchen and poured a mug of coffee and grabbed his cigarettes. Rain was sitting at the table, his cheek resting on his folded arms, his eyelids heavy and tired. “We’re going outside,” Andrew directed.

Rain got to his feet, stretching with agonizing slowness before getting his own mug of coffee and following Andrew.

The house didn’t have a proper back porch but there was a small cement patio area, the concrete cracked and sprouting weeds. It looked out on the dark, overgrown backyard, hidden from the neighbors by a wooden fence that Andrew had painstakingly helped erect after Tilda. It was his sole home improvement project but the scant privacy it afforded them was worth it. Nicky took advantage of the arrangement to sunbathe naked, claiming that tan lines were tacky. Andrew and Aaron, who burned instead of tanned, refused to join him.

Andrew settled into one of the faded lawn chairs and pulled the other close, cattycorner to his so he could study Rain’s face, which was illuminated by the light streaming from the sliding glass door. Rain sat down, cradling his coffee mug and squinting a bit at the light but he didn’t complain. Andrew lit a cigarette, enjoying the first hit and the combination of the smoke with the bitter coffee. He extended the pack to Rain but he just waved them off.

“I don’t want to waste your imports,” Rain explained. “If it was just your regular gas station brand then maybe.”

“Suit yourself,” Andrew said with a shrug but he did exhale the smoke in Rain’s direction earning a small, grateful smile.

For a few minutes they were quiet, sipping at their coffee. It was late, verging on early, and the neighborhood was largely silent. Bugs continued their ceaseless chorus and the frogs that inhabited the ditch out by the road were equally loud. It was hot and humid, the air heavy and still; Rain pulled at his shirt, trying to circulate some air.

Andrew tapped his cigarette against the lawn chair’s plastic armrest and gazed at Rain through slitted eyelids. “So,” he began, his tone deliberately casual, “let’s talk.”

Rain sat up, moving forward so that his weight was balanced on the edge of his chair. “What do you want to know?” His voice was tight, strained. Andrew noticed that he was gripping his mug so hard that his knuckles were white.

“Calm down, rabbit,” Andrew said. “Do you trust me or not?” Rain nodded but his eyes wouldn’t meet Andrew’s. Andrew took a deep inhale, holding the smoke before exhaling hard. “Clearly you don’t.” Before Rain could protest Andrew cut him off. “Don’t. Enough lies. We’ll play a little game, truth for truth. I’ll ask you a question, you answer and you can ask me something. Fair?” Rain nodded. “Good. Let’s start easy. What’s your name?”

Rain flinched like Andrew had gone to strike him. “Pass.” His voice was hollow.


Reluctantly Rain pulled his wallet out of the back pocket of his borrowed sweats. Andrew wasn’t surprised that Rain had kept it close to him, even here. He tossed the ragged duct tape wallet to Andrew. The pattern was of flames and the wallet smelled like incense and cigarettes and pot.
Andrew riffled through the slim contents with interest. Several twenties were tucked in the billfold, there were business cards for Pipe Dream, a phone card, and a shiny California driver’s license issued to Rain Storm. Andrew glanced up to find Rain watching him.

“Rain Storm? Really?”

Rain shrugged. “It was my mom’s idea.”

“Oh yeah? What was here name? April Showers?”

Rain glared and bit his lower lip, his eyes looked suspiciously glassy. “My mother is dead,” he whispered. “Her name was Mary.” He scratched behind his ear, the movement unconscious. Andrew saw the black lines of the tattoo as Rain’s fingers skimmed his skin, pushing his hair out of the way.

“Is the tattoo for her?” Rain looked surprised by the question, sitting up straight and rapidly pulling his hand into his lap. So yes.

Rain stared into his coffee, shoulders hunched. “Yes.” It was almost too quiet to hear. “We were in Mexico. About a year ago.” Rain’s voice shuddered and he swallowed hard, twice. “We were working on a farm. Typical gig: rural and communal, lots of expats. It was near the coast, not far from California. We should have been safe there.”

Rain was quiet for so long that Andrew was sure he wasn’t going to say anything else, that he was too closed off in his memories. “What happened?”

“We were found.” Each word was weighted and bleak. “We had been running for eight years. I don’t know how they found us but… they killed everyone. Burned down the farm. I was in the fields; I smelled the smoke before I saw the fire and it was too late. But I still tried. I tried to find her.” There was a raw catch in Rain’s voice. “She burned with the rest of them. I found her bones in the barn. Buried her at the beach.”

Andrew’s cigarette had burned out, neglected. He tapped it absently against the chair. “Who? Who did it?”

“My father.”

The truth for a truth game was unnecessary. Now that Rain was talking it was like he didn’t want to shut up. Andrew knew what it was like to carry secrets, to feel the burden of them squeezing out every emotion. What must it feel like to let them go like Rain was?

“We were hiding from my father. His people killed my mother, killed the others. I researched it later. They staged it to look like a drug-related massacre. Fuckers.” The pain was leaving Rain’s voice, replaced by slow burning fury.

“Rain.” Andrew sat forward, placed a heavy hand on Rain’s knee. “Who the fuck is your father?”

“You don’t need to know.” Andrew opened his mouth but Rain’s hand came down on his, fingernails digging into his wrist. “You. Don’t. Need. To. Know. He’s the devil. He’s a sociopath. He’s relentless. He will kill you all if he discovers me and my connection to you.”

Andrew tugged at his hand and Rain released him. “That’s fucking fantastic,” he muttered. “So that’s who Jason wants to give you to if you don’t behave?” Rain nodded. “Fucking fantastic.”

“Told you I was more trouble than I was worth.”
“I believe you.” Rain peered at him. “Don’t worry, I’m not cutting you loose. Let’s brainstorm. You’ve managed to stay under your father’s radar for a year. How did you accomplish that?”

“I stayed on the move. I got back into the states and started traveling the festival circuit. I figured that my father could find me at any time and I decided to go a little wild.” Rain ruffled his hair, purple curls flopping endearingly. “I changed appearance so regularly, moved around constantly. Most people didn’t need to see an ID, I worked under the table, meeting vendors and merchants, relying on the kindness of strangers.”


“You’re a stranger,” Rain pointed out, “and you’re helping me.”

Andrew didn’t have a good comeback for that.

“Look, I was raised paranoid by my mom but I was also raised on communes by peace-loving hippies so… I know just how horrible humans can be but I also know that we’re capable of good things, too. And for a year I found that balance and I kept running.”

“Until Jason,” Andrew corrected.

“Until Jason,” Rain agreed. He looked sick. “Honestly I don’t know how I managed to fuck up this bad. Well, that’s a lie,” Rain scuffed his bare feet on the concrete and sank further into his chair, making the rusted metal squeak and groan. “I’m pretty sure that motherfucker roofied me and I just fucking signed over my life to him. Stupid…”

“Explain,” Andrew bit out the word.

“Have you ever been to a music festival?” Rain asked. Andrew shook his head. “I thought so. Okay, so it’s a lot of drinking and smoking, drugs going around. Obviously I tried not to go too crazy but then I got to Bonnaroo and the dude I was working for was set up right next to Jason’s tent. Jason and Rick, that’s the guy I was working for, were being all buddy buddy, passing around drinks and shit. So Rick gets a drink for me, something that tasted like lemonade. I don’t really know…” A light sheen of sweat beaded over Rain’s forehead and he swiped at it. “It was the last night of the festival, we were gonna pack up and head out the next day. Jason started telling us about his business in South Carolina and it sounded legit. I was kinda fading at that point, like I thought I was just really tired it didn’t occur to me until it was too late that I had been drugged but I uh agreed to work for him. I don’t know…”

Rain trailed off. Andrew tried his coffee but it was tepid. He set the mug on the concrete and lit another cigarette while Rain got himself together.

“Long story short I ended up with Jason, woke up dehydrated and sick about an hour outside of town and it was too late to run though I didn’t know I needed to, yet.” Rain sighed heavily. “It didn’t get bad until he made the connection that I was the missing son of, well, you know.”

“How’d he figure that out?”

Rain shrugged. “Organized crime social networking? I don’t fucking know. He woke me up on night. Pinned me to the bed. He had a knife. He said my name—” Rain shuddered, his face sickly pale. “I… didn’t handle that well. I think he was only guessing but I blew it, gave myself away.”

Andrew’s anger burned hot and homicidal. His brain constructed the scene with vivid details supplied by his own memories. He could relate too much, too well: the terror and helplessness, the
crushing feeling of being trapped, the edge of violence and the need to survive.

“I will kill him,” Andrew said simply. And it was simple. He had already thought of several plausible, accidental deaths. He could fabricate solutions for Rain, too. He had connections at Eden’s or it was possible that Wymack or Abby could find a way to get Rain a job at Palmetto.

“You can’t.” Rain stood, momentarily towering over Andrew so that he had to tip his head back to meet his eyes. Rain’s expression was hard to interpret but his voice was certain. “He told me, after, that he’s made arrangements. If he dies the information will be sent to my father. It doesn’t matter how he dies the information will get out. I won’t be able to run fast enough or far enough, not this time.”

Andrew furrowed his forehead in frustration. “Well. Shit.” Rain nodded and turned away, facing the yard. His arms were wrapped over his chest and he was squeezing his arms hard, fingers digging into skin and muscle.

It all seemed, briefly, like it was too much, an impossible conundrum, a puzzle too complex for solving. Andrew thought of Kevin, hounded and terrorized by the Moriyamas. He thought of Aaron, beaten by their mother and Nicky, ostracized by his parents. He thought of all the foxes, problematic and damaged. Was it really fair to add Rain to their already chaotic lives? They were all struggling to survive, to recover. There was so much that could go wrong.

Andrew retrieved his cold mug of coffee and stood. He regarded the tense line of Rain’s back, studied the sugar skull tattoo peeking out behind his ear, a momento mori for his deceased mother. The future divided ahead of him, alternate universes preparing to diverge as he stepped forward and pressed his thumb over the tattoo.

Rain didn’t flinch at the contact. Instead it was like his rigid posture crumpled, his body sagging beneath Andrew’s thumb.

“C’mon,” Andrew said again, his fingers tugging lightly at Rain’s hair. “We’re not going to figure this out tonight.”

Rain turned and he looked so tired and done. “It’s… admirable. That you still want to help. But I don’t think you should.”

“Fuck that,” Andrew replied, but his words lacked their usual caustic bite. “Now c’mon. It’s fucking late. I need to sleep. You definitely need to sleep.” Rain didn’t say anything else but he did follow Andrew inside, watching carefully as Andrew locked the door and pulled the curtains closed. He eyed the curtains warily.

“Take my bed,” Andrew said. “I’ll take the couch.”

“But—”

“Look, you’re not gonna be able to sleep out here, right?” Rain sort of shrugged and nodded at the same time. “My bedroom door locks from the inside only. You’ll be safe.” He picked up one of the couch pillows, punching it into a more comfortable shape. “I’ll be down here if you need me just… if you have to wake me don’t touch me, alright?” Rain nodded again, fidgeting his hands and arms awkwardly.

“Thank you.” Rain glanced at Andrew then away, chewing on the inside of his cheek. “Uh… can I… I want to… kiss you?” His words were stilted, fumbling. “Like on the cheek? A thank you kiss?”

Maybe he was tired. Maybe he was still bothered by the shocking, unprovoked kiss at the club.
Maybe it was the way Rain sounded both sincere and hesitant at the same time. Maybe it was novelty, a kiss on the cheek.

Andrew nodded, holding his breath as Rain broached the space between them and tilted his face down just a little, enough, and kissed him. It was already over and done with, Rain stepping back, blushing, and heading for the stairs and Andrew’s bedroom. Andrew sank down onto the couch, one arm resting on his stomach, the other draped over his eyes. There was no reason why his face should feel like it was burning, no reason why his long deadened heart had stumbled for a brief second. His hands squeezed into fists. *This could be a problem.*
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Be advised: discussion of Rain’s extensive injuries and abuse

Andrew woke with the sun in his eyes. He squinted and blinked, annoyed because why the fuck was the sun in his eyes? And why was his back so sore? Two seconds later his brain caught up and he remembered that he was on the couch at the Columbia house. The reason the sun was in his face was because some asshole had gone out the back door and hadn’t pulled the curtains back into place.

Grumbling, Andrew stood and stretched, his back and neck popping loudly. There was a bad taste in his mouth, a combination of coffee and smoke. He checked his phone and learned that it was just after ten in the morning, way too early for anyone in his group to be awake which left Rain as the most likely suspect. Andrew didn’t know how he felt about Rain walking by him while he slept. He trusted Rain almost as much as he trusted Kevin but still, it was unsettling.

Brushing back the curtain Andrew looked out on the back yard. Rain was balanced on a towel that he had laid out on the overgrown lawn. His back was to the house and Andrew couldn’t help but stare. Rain had taken off his shirt and was doing what appeared to be yoga, gracefully moving into a new pose and holding it before shifting into another position. Andrew could hardly breathe, his eyes not sure what to register first: Rain’s body or the patchwork of scars that covered his skin.

His mind decided for him, automatically running a damage report. Rain’s tanned skin was a mess of scars: mottled burns, raised slashes, puckered and circular scars that could only be from gunshot wounds. Over top of the scars were fresh injuries, deep purple bruises in areas that Andrew knew would result in maximum pain without leading to incapacitation. Raised, red welts peeked above the waistband of his sweatpants which… Andrew didn’t want to think about what that meant. A belt, most likely. A leather belt against bare skin, skin hidden by the grey sweatpants. His hands flexed into fists, a shudder passing through him. Andrew couldn’t believe that Rain was able to do yoga with those kinds of injuries; his pain tolerance must be off the charts.

The horrific damage should have detracted from Rain’s attractiveness, but it didn’t. Beneath the baggy t-shirts Rain was hiding a compact body, slender but strong. There didn’t seem to be an ounce of body fat on him, just muscle and skin clinging tight to bones. He had beautiful arms; Andrew admired their lines as Rain held his arms over his head, palms pressed together like he was praying. It was like looking at one of those Japanese ceramics, where the cracks were filled with gold, the piece gaining beauty rather than losing it. Except, Andrew reflected, the cracks on Rain were caused by violence and, as the new injuries attested, they weren’t protection from further abuse.

Rain turned, facing the house, and he caught sight of Andrew. He flinched in surprise but then shook it off; he waved at Andrew to come outside.

Andrew slid the door open, blinking at the direct sunlight. It was already stifling and sweat was trickling down Rain’s face, neck, and chest. Andrew’s jaw almost dropped because fuck not only was Rain stupidly hot and ripped, but he also had a navel piercing and more tattoos. The piercing was the biggest surprise, shiny and winking in the sunlight.

“Who convinced you that was a good idea?” Andrew asked, pointing at Rain’s stomach, his very
firm stomach. Andrew’s voice was rough. From sleep.

Rain ran his hand down his abs and tapped the piercing. “The same person who did this.” He touched the tattoo on his chest, a sacred heart placed over his own heart. It was anatomically correct, wreathed in flames and wrapped in thorns. Andrew moved closer to study the details.

“They did a nice job,” was all he said.

Rain grinned. “Yep. I got these in California; I stayed with some really cool folks in L.A. before going to Burning Man. One of the ladies was apprenticing with a tattoo artist so she did this all for free.”

Andrew traced the tattoo with his finger; he could feel the hardness of scar tissue below the ink. “It’s pretty badass. Are you religious?”

“Pfft!” Rain snorted. “Not exactly.” He covered the tattoo with his palm, briefly trapping Andrew’s hand against his chest. Rain’s heart was beating at a steady, calm rate. “I wanted something to cover the scarring and Elizabet said it would be good practice.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Rain dropped his hand and settled down on the towel, pulling his legs up in the lotus position. Andrew sat on the opposite end of the towel. He was feeling twitchy and could definitely use a morning cigarette and cup of coffee.

“I’m not religious,” Rain explained. “But I’m spiritual. I’ve learned about lots of belief systems while I traveled and they all have some good points. I guess I subscribe to a mixture of them.” He shrugged. “I’m doing my best.”

Andrew didn’t know how Rain was sitting so easily if his backside was whipped nearly raw; he squirmed in sympathetic discomfort.

“I heard you threaten to kill a man. You were very graphic,” Andrew pointed out.

“I never said I was a saint.” Rain’s smile was so dark and twisted that Andrew felt impressed. And a little turned on. But that could have been because Rain was still shirtless and sweaty.

“Sinners and saints,” Andrew mused. “Nicky’s the religious one in our group. And Renee, if you ever meet her. The rest of us do what we want.”

“You don’t believe in God? Or like, a higher power?” Rain asked. He sounded curious instead of judgmental so Andrew answered him.

“No. If there’s a God in control of this shitshow he’s a fucking asshole. Trust me, I’ve had this conversation with Nicky already. If I end up going to hell it can’t be much worse than this place. I assumed that you,” Andrew gestured to Rain’s scars, “would get that.”

Rain’s half-smile was bitter. “There’s a line about how hell is empty and the devils are all here, I think that’s true. My-my father is one of them. His people are.” Rain plucked some long stems of grass and started plaiting them together. “There’s a lot of shitty people out there and I’ve met more of them than most people usually do. I’ve done things, too, so I’m no innocent but… I don’t know. I lived with some really good people. I’ve met people who were hurt badly but they kept living and they were trying to help others. I met people who used to do bad things but they were working to be better. Life… it’s this process and we can choose to become heroes or villains.”
Andrew stared. Rain kept braiding his grass, tying it at the end. He looked calm and it made Andrew angry. This kid was covered in scars and bruises and welts and here he was, doing yoga and talking about *good people*?

“Lemme see your wrist,” Rain said. Andrew frowned slightly and held his wrist out. Rain looped the grass around his arm and tied it, making a bracelet. “A little big,” Rain observed as the bracelet slid down Andrew’s wrist, over his black armbands.

Rain got busy making another grass braid. It was getting hotter by the moment, the sun making its gradual ascent. Andrew’s stomach grumbled. He wanted a cigarette, coffee, and breakfast, preferably indoors in the air conditioning. He didn’t know how Rain could stand the heat.

“Alright, could you tie this one on my wrist?” Rain requested, holding the grass chain out for Andrew. Andrew did as Rain asked. He noticed that Rain had light scarring on his wrists, circular scars wrapping around like silvery bracelets. Restraints? Handcuffs? Wire?

“Thanks!” Rain beamed. “Now we have matching bracelets.”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “Great. What are you, four?”


Andrew didn’t know what to do with all this. He was still trying to process that Rain was the son of some extremely violent and powerful mob boss who had been searching for his runaway wife and son for eight fucking years before slaughtering an entire commune in Mexico. Rain, who had been horribly abused, who was still trapped and being hurt by some asshole who had rendered himself untouchable by holding the truth of Rain’s past. Rain was a hostage, a victim, but here he was making grass bracelets and talking about God. Nothing about him made sense.

“Okay,” Andrew said finally. He got to his feet, his stomach growled again. “I’m starving. C’mon, let’s go get breakfast.”

Rain nodded eagerly and stood, wincing a little as he retrieved his towel. His first steps were limping before he steadied himself. “Oof, I didn’t do any cool down stretches,” Rain complained. “My body got all stiff while we were talking.”

Andrew opened the door and Rain followed him inside. The room seemed dark after the brightness of the back yard.

“Can I grab a quick shower before breakfast?” Rain asked. He was wiping sweat off his face with the grass-covered towel, getting dirt and grass stuck to his chest in the process.

Andrew swallowed hard. “Yeah. We’ll be going out. There’s no food here, other than some ice cream.”

“I noticed,” Rain said. “I went through the cupboards last night.”

Andrew twitched an eyebrow up at that. “Enterprising of you.”

Rain shrugged and turned to leave. The bruises and welts looked worse on a second viewing.

“Rain—” Andrew’s voice came out strangled.

Rain cocked his head, inquisitive. “Yeah?”
“Who did that?” Rain’s face went blank and distant. “Who beat the shit out of you?”

Rain closed his eyes, every muscle in his body tensing. He was perfectly still, not even breathing, for almost a minute. “Andrew.” His voice was cold, empty. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Was it Jason?” Andrew demanded.

Rain’s fingers ghosted over the bruises. “He… he hits me if I get out of line. The others,” Rain shuddered. “Some people want a whipping boy. That’s not Jason’s thing.”

“Then who the fuck—”

Rain wrapped the towel around his shoulders, hugging it close to his chest. “Jason’s not the top of the food chain.” That’s all he said and then he was gone. Andrew listened to his light footsteps as Rain climbed the stairs. The shower came on and Andrew just stood there listening, feeling the words echo in his mind. *Jason’s not the top of the food chain.*

He went to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee, smoking at the table despite Aaron’s house rule of no smoking indoors. *Jason’s not the top of the food chain.* Andrew poured some coffee, gulping it down even though it scalded his mouth and throat. *Jason’s not the top of the food chain.* Somewhere out there was a twisted motherfucker who liked taking a belt to Rain and it made Andrew so furious that he had descended into a deep calm. He didn’t have enough information and Rain didn’t want to talk about it but he needed to know. *Jason’s not the top of the food chain.* Whoever was at the top, did they know who Rain was? If not could they be used to eliminate Jason? If that happened—if someone from the top took out Jason—would that fail to trigger Jason’s information leak? What would happen to Rain? Was there a way to barter his freedom from someone who held more power and influence than Jason?

Andrew hated himself for considering it: going to whoever was hurting Rain and trying to negotiate his liberation. It was more likely that the person would keep Rain unless… Andrew banged his head on the table.

“Whoa there, buddy.”

Nicky shuffled into the kitchen. His hair was sticking up and his chin was scruffy. “What’s got you headbangin’ so early in the am?”

Andrew glared. “It’s not early, it’s nearly eleven.”

Nicky yawned hugely. “I’m up before noon, it’s early.” He opened the fridge and poked around even though it was obvious that there was no edible food. Nicky whined. “Why is the rum gone?”

“Lush.” Kevin stepped into the tiny kitchen, slumping into a chair next to Andrew.

“Takes one to know one, Day,” Nicky quipped.

“Shut up, both of you,” Andrew snapped. “I’m trying to think.”

“But it’s so early!” Nicky gasped. Kevin grunted his assent.

“It. Is. Not. Early.” Andrew repeated. “Get cleaned up. We’re getting Waffle House as soon as Rain gets out of the shower.”

“I’m clean enough,” Kevin mumbled, his head pillowed in his arms.
“Kevin, dear, you smell like five types of cologne and perfume and alcohol,” Nicky said. “I’m not going out in public with you like this.”

Kevin raised his middle finger in response.

“If you hurry you can take a shower with Rain!” Nicky laughed. “Rain Shower, get it? Kevin? Get it?”

“I fucking hate you,” Kevin groaned.

“No one is taking a shower with Rain,” Andrew commanded at the exact moment that Rain walked into the kitchen.

Rain looked at the three of them, still toweling his hair dry. “Well, you missed your chance,” he joked.

Nicky didn’t look at all embarrassed and Andrew didn’t even want to look at Rain right then. Kevin, after further prodding from Nicky, went to clean up. Rain got some coffee and took Kevin’s seat. Under the table his bare foot bumped into Andrew’s. At first Andrew thought it was an accident until Rain did it again. Andrew glanced at him.

“We okay?” Rain mouthed, his expression uncertain. Andrew sighed deeply but nodded.

Nicky was oblivious to the exchange, scrolling through his phone and talking away about the homework he had to do and how Kevin still talked in his sleep. Rain spider-walked his fingers across the table, the movements exaggerated, like his hand was a lion sneaking up on its prey. He dramatically pounced his hand on Andrew’s and gripped his hand tightly. Their grass bracelets bumped together, looking like strange cuffs. Andrew felt his heart do something odd. Rain’s foot bumped against him once more and stayed, pressed against his.

“Uh… are you guys like holding hands?” Nicky asked.

“No,” Andrew said.

“I’m testing his finger strength,” Rain added.

Andrew moved his hand like he was bucking off Rain’s grip and Rain, ever the performer, conceded defeat, his hand landing limping on the table next to Andrew’s.

“It’s like arm wrestling, but with hands,” Rain continued. “It’s a test of physical and mental strength. As you can see, Andrew is very strong.”

“Riiight…” Nicky drawled. “I bet that trick works on all the boys.”

Rain shrugged happily and Andrew took his cigarette outside.
“Rain, I can’t believe you’ve never eaten grits! It’s like a travesty.” Nicky was holding a spoonful of buttery and cheesy grits and trying to make Rain eat them. Rain smiled politely and picked at his pile of hash browns. Andrew wasn’t surprised that Rain – consummate hippie love child – was also a vegan. Rain didn’t make a big deal about it when they rolled into the Waffle House; he just studied the menu carefully and ordered hash browns with orange juice and coffee. When Nicky had pestered him to order more Rain had explained that he didn’t eat animal products if he could help it.

“I ate the ice cream last night because I was starving,” Rain admitted. “I like ice cream but it doesn’t like me much these days.”

“Lots of athletes are vegan,” Kevin commented before digging into his omelet. Aaron said nothing but he rolled his eyes and seemed to be overdoing his enjoyment of his sausage biscuit. He was being extra bitchy since Katelyn had gone to meet up with local friends for brunch and would be making her own way back to school.

“I really don’t understand how you and Andrew get along so well,” Nicky continued, undeterred by the death rays that Andrew was aiming at his face. “You’re so nice! And… and all world peace, sunshine, and rabbits.”

Rain laughed, his lips curling into an incredulous smile. “Where did the rabbits come from?”

“Don’t all hippies like rabbits? Rabbits are cute.”

“Nicky, please shut up,” Kevin said. “You’re embarrassing all of us.”

“What? It’s just a question. Don’t be so touchy.”

“I actually prefer cats,” Rain said. “Someday I want like a houseful of cats.”

Andrew snorted and drank his coffee, trying to picture Rain as a cat lady. He hadn’t missed the quiet wistfulness in Rain’s voice and knew that Rain doubted he would ever realize this simple dream. He knocked his knee against Rain’s and left it there. Rain smiled a little and tapped his shoe against Andrew’s boots.

“I think someone is kicking me,” Nicky said. “Kevin, are you kicking me? I mean, I’m flattered but I’m taken.”

“Oh my god,” Aaron muttered. “Not everyone wants you Nicky.”

“No one asked for your opinion, dear cousin,” Nicky replied. “Besides if I don’t annoy Kevin he will completely lose his sense of humor and then where will we be?”

“In the Waffle House,” Aaron deadpanned.

Rain laughed obligingly and Aaron gave him and Andrew an odd look. Andrew stared back, silently daring Aaron to say anything. After their disastrous “coming out” conversation he and Aaron hadn’t talked about Andrew’s love life, which was how Andrew wanted it. He didn’t really care if Aaron approved of Rain or not, just as long as he didn’t make things difficult. As for Rain… Andrew didn’t know. He had been trying not to think about it but he knew things were different. He no longer saw Rain as someone who could be a casual fuck; he didn’t see him as just a scared kid who needed to be rescued. At some point Rain had become a real person, at some point he had become as important to
Andrew as the other guys sitting at the table. But what did Rain think of him? What was going on behind his chill, hippie façade?

“Hey Andrew, what do you think?”

Andrew blinked. Nicky was looking at him expectantly but he had lost track of the conversation. So he improvised and did what he did best: stared with no expression.

“Typical,” Kevin muttered.

“I guess he’s not a cat person, Rain,” Nicky shrugged. “Probably likes snakes.”

Andrew did not like snakes but he didn’t bother to correct Nicky.

“I had a pet tarantula one time,” Rain said. “I mean, I don’t know if it considered itself my pet. But I kept it in a shoebox and fed it crickets. Until it got out one night…”

“No!” Nicky looked terrified. “Rain! It could have laid giant tarantula eggs in your throat!”

Rain looked appropriately horrified. “That’s disgusting,” Aaron commented. “And I think Rain would have noticed if a huge spider—”

“Okay, stop,” Kevin interrupted. He had one hand over his mouth and he looked ill. “Stop or you will all see my omelet again, right now.”

“Sorry, Kevin,” Rain looked truly repentant. He fidgeted with his grass bracelet, his shoe steadily tapping against Andrew’s foot.

“I like cats, too,” Andrew said. He meant for only Rain to hear him but suddenly the entire table was staring at him in disbelief. Andrew took a sip of coffee and waited.

“Since when?!” Nicky demanded. “You remember when I found that stray cat and you wouldn’t let me bring it home?”

“That ‘cat’ was a raccoon, Nicky. It was 3am and you found the thing rooting in the trash behind Eden’s. You tried to hug it but I stopped you from getting rabies and dying.”

“You thought a raccoon was a cat?” Rain snickered helplessly, his shoulder rubbing against Andrew’s.

“As the man said, it was late. I was drunk. Look, some cats are big and stripy. It could happen to anyone.”

Crisis adverted Andrew watched the rest of the conversation veer to less interesting topics than his shared affinity for cats. At some point Rain slipped his hand under the table, leaving it palm up on his thigh. Andrew considered ignoring him but then decided fuck it and casually put his hand under the table, too. He traced his fingertips along Rain’s fingers, over his palm, up his wrist. For a gesture that was so small it felt extremely charged. Rain had gone completely still beside him, except for a slight tremor that Andrew felt since their thighs were pressed together. He could swear that Rain’s breath hitched just the tiniest bit when his fingernails scratched lightly at his wrist. Despite all the things that stood between them—not the least being Andrew’s own issues with intimacy and Rain’s “I’m not gay” declaration—Andrew couldn’t help but think about how good it would be to make Rain fall apart, to watch his face contort with pleasure, to hear him scream his name—

Andrew jerked his hand away from Rain’s wrist and abruptly got up from the table.
“Andrew?” Nicky asked. Andrew had a feeling that he was breaking up a good conversation all over again but he didn’t care.

“Bathroom,” Andrew said tersely.

Waffle Houses weren’t designed for privacy; the bathrooms were located off a very short hall, the doors in full view of the entire diner. Andrew opened the door and locked it behind him. Only when he knew that he was alone and safe did he allow the deep, shuddering breath to escape his lungs. He gripped the ceramic sink and stared into the drain, willing his heart to slow down, his breath to even out, his thoughts to settle. It was pointless to fantasize about Rain and it fucking hurt. Andrew wasn’t a fan of suffering and this one sided attraction had to go. He didn’t know what Rain was doing, with the kiss, the handholding, the grass bracelets, but it had to stop. They had to be either all or nothing; Andrew couldn’t deal with the nebulous something that was dangling between them.

Slowly, bit by bit, he schooled his feelings, packing them away. They were distractions, unwelcome and dangerous. He must have been at it longer than he thought because someone knocked at the door. Andrew turned on the sink, pretending to wash his hands, and moved to unlock the door.

Rain was standing just outside, his hand still raised to knock again. He opened his mouth to say something, shut it, tried again.

“The others, they sent me to get you.” He was staring at Andrew so intently that Andrew felt like he must be giving away everything, like his mask was imperfect. Rain swallowed before continuing, his voice quiet. “They’re outside. Andrew…”

It was the way Rain said his name that killed him, that made him snap. Andrew grabbed the front of Rain’s shirt and dragged him into the bathroom and pushed him back against the wall, his forearm pressing against Rain’s chest.

And Rain… he didn’t even react, other than to reach up and gently place his hands over Andrew’s arm. Despite his apparent calm Andrew could feel Rain’s heart pounding against his fist.

“Stop.” Andrew spat the word at Rain. It felt like someone had poured molten lava in his chest cavity. “Stop looking at me like that. Stop trying to play nice or whatever the fuck you’re doing. Okay? I’m not a mark. I’m helping you because I want to so just… stop.”

Rain didn’t say anything, though his face flushed pink. He looked down and away, his heart racing. To emphasize his point Andrew brought his wrist up to face and bit down on the grass bracelet until it came loose; he let it drop to the floor. At last Rain looked at him and it was like facing another person. Rain’s expression was distant and cold, almost as emotionless as Andrew’s.

“What’s this?” Rain asked in a lifeless monotone. “You’re breaking up with me?”

Andrew was so surprised he didn’t say anything. He backed up and watched as Rain bent down and retrieved the bracelet.

“Contrary to what you think,” Rain continued, voice halting, “I’m not trying to manipulate you. I’m sorry for… I’m sorry if…” Rain paused, his head still bowed, his fingers pulling at the grass bracelet, slowly unraveling it. He shook his head once and sighed, before making eye contact with Andrew. “I’m sorry.”

Rain edged towards the door and Andrew almost let him leave. It would be easier to let him leave. Andrew had effectively killed whatever vibe they had going on and that was what he wanted. Wasn’t it? Except everything felt wrong. Rain wasn’t acting like a guy who had been called out for
faking; he was acting like it was real.

Andrew caught Rain’s wrist and pulled him close, close enough that he could count the light colored freckles on Rain’s face and smell the coffee on his breath. This time Rain tried to pull away. His mouth turned down in a snarl but his eyes were too wet and hurt to make the anger convincing.

“What the fuck, Andrew?” Rain hissed, trying to yank his arm out of Andrew’s hold.

“You’re not gay.” Andrew said. He had nothing else to follow up the statement with, he just watched Rain, feeling confused and hopeful.

“I’m not,” Rain agreed. He searched Andrew’s face. “Is that what this is all about?” he whispered. Andrew nodded. Rain relaxed a little. “I’m not gay but that doesn’t mean I’m straight. It doesn’t mean that I don’t like you.”

“So you’re… what, then?” Andrew asked.

Rain shrugged. “Does it matter? I like you. I’m not trying to play you, to mess with you. Though… I should just tell you to get lost and leave me alone because we both know.” Rain took a breath, swallowed, “we both know this won’t end well.”

“Like hell it won’t,” Andrew growled.

Rain held Andrew’s stare. “My life is fucked, Andrew. It was over before we even met. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I let things get this far. It’s not fair, to either of us.”

“So that’s it?” Andrew laughed bitterly. “You like me but you don’t want to hurt me so we’re done?” Rain nodded. “Jesus, Rain. You don’t know me – how could you? – but I don’t walk away from a fight. And I willingly signed up to fight for you. So quit trying to be brave and go it alone.”

“Argh!!! You are so frustrating!” Rain yelled, pulling away from him and throwing up his hands. It was the most riled that Andrew had seen him. “What do you want from me?!”

“I want…,” Andrew let the words hang as he sorted it out. Rain liked him. Rain was in the trouble. He didn’t know how to help but he wanted to help, was determined to find a way to get Rain out of Jason’s control. Rain liked him. “I want to try that kiss again.”

Rain snorted. “I’m not kissing you in a Waffle House bathroom. I have some standards.”

Andrew shrugged. “It’s not so bad. It would be memorable, at least.”

Rain moved into Andrew’s space, dark eyes alight with challenge. “I think I would be memorable anywhere but,” his eyes flicked down to Andrew’s lips, then back up again, “if that’s a challenge—”

“It’s definitely a challenge.”

“You’re impossible,” Rain breathed and tilted his head down, his eyes sliding shut, a soft blush rising on his cheeks. The slight pressure of his lips against the corner of Andrew’s mouth was a surprise. You missed Andrew thought for a moment. But Rain wasn’t done. His lips brushed over Andrew’s, soft, then coaxing. Rain’s tongue flicked against his lips and there was nothing shy or hesitant about it. Andrew opened up for Rain, let the kiss unfold slowly before kissing him back. Andrew cupped Rain’s face in his, feeling fierce and hungry and protective. His fingers pushed into Rain’s purple hair and it felt so good to finally be doing this, to let himself feel this.

Andrew could have kissed Rain forever, slowly dismantling him piece by piece. Already his hands
were itching to touch Rain again, to map the network of scars and injuries, to let his fingertips memorize the path of smooth skin snaking around slashes and burns. Rain whimpered quietly, his entire body shaking, his hands gripping the sink as if he could barely keep himself on his feet. Andrew pressed against him, one hand tangled in his hair, the other wrapped around his throat so he could feel how fast Rain’s heart raced, how his breathing hitched, how his Adam’s apple moved when he swallowed quiet gasps.

“Hey, Andrew, hurry it up!” Aaron called from the other side of the door. He knocked twice for emphasis. Andrew wanted to ignore him but Rain had already stopped kissing him. He looked amazing: pupils blown wide, hair a mess, lips red, and a hectic flush on his face and neck. Andrew kissed him one more time and felt Rain smiling against his lips.

“Wow,” Rain whispered. He blinked slowly like he was waking up.

“Yeah?” Andrew asked, feeling smug and pleased.

“Yeah.” Rain grinned and kissed Andrew’s cheek.

Aaron made an impatient sound from the other side of the door and Andrew rolled his eyes in response even though his twin couldn’t see him. He took Rain by the hand and led him towards the door. Rain was still a little unsteady and he held Andrew’s hand tightly.

“Does he know?” Rain asked as Andrew went to open the door.

Andrew nodded. “He’s good at keeping secrets.”

When they left the bathroom Aaron was waiting for them in the hall. He took one look at Rain’s rumpled appearance and choked. “You have got to be shitting me,” he muttered angrily. “In the bathroom? Really, Andrew?”

Andrew tousled Rain’s hair into a more presentable mess and shrugged. “It was memorable.” Rain laughed lightly and squeezed his hand.

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The rest of the day felt like a blur. Andrew drove Aaron, Kevin, and Nicky back to campus and then dropped off Rain at Jason’s. His bubble of good feeling was instantly punctured, even though Rain did his best to put a brave face on it.

“It’ll be okay,” Rain told him. “We’ll keep thinking and figure it out.”

Andrew stared at the house moodily. He couldn’t lie to Rain. The odds of him fixing this were not good. Instead of answering he kissed Rain again.

“Call me,” Andrew said. “If I don’t hear from you after two days I’ll come by the shop, okay?”

Rain nodded. “I’ll try.” He got out of the car and walked up the weedy sidewalk to the dark house. He waved once before disappearing around the back. Andrew knew he shouldn’t linger but he hated driving away. This felt worse than anything he had been through; worse the watching his mother beat Aaron that one time, worse than the foster homes. There was no guarantee that he would see Rain again, that he could save him.

Andrew drove back to PSU feeling like the world was ending.
Chapter 13

Two days and Andrew hadn’t heard from Rain and the anxiety was eating him alive. He was camped out on the roof, cigarette between his lips, scowling out at the horizon. It was too damn hot for this but after smoking compulsively for nearly an hour Kevin had kicked him out of the room. Andrew inhaled and wiped sweat from his forehead. There was no shade to be had on the roof of Fox Tower and he knew his pale skin was burning. He was hot and miserable. The stifling feeling of being trapped settled tight over his skin and Andrew hacked out a few ugly coughs, trying to shake off the creeping sense that something was terribly wrong.

The door to the roof creaked open and Andrew listened to the approaching footsteps. Aaron.

“Hey.” His brother moved to stand on Andrew’s left, casting his shadow over him, making Andrew crane his neck up and up and up to see his twin’s face.

Andrew exhaled out the side of his mouth and cracked his neck a few times. He tapped ash onto Aaron’s shoe.

“What,” Andrew said. He squinted his eyes and studied Aaron. His brother looked conflicted. But then, he was always easy for Andrew to read.

“What’s going on with you and Rain?” Aaron asked. He shoved his hands into his jeans pockets and shifted awkwardly.

Andrew leaned back on his palms, aimlessly flipping his cigarette up and down with his lips. He needed to stub it out soon.

“C’mon, Andrew. I saw the way you were in the Waffle House. Plus you let him ride shotgun all the way back to here from Columbia. You let him sleep at our house—”

“I told you about that ahead of time,” Andrew said, cutting him off.

“Right, yeah, you did. But when I talked to him at the smoke shop he said he wasn’t gay so what the hell? Are you just like using him or something?”

Andrew managed to reign in his response – kicking Aaron’s shins – and slowly ground out his cigarette on the cement. He hopped to his feet and crowded into his brother’s space, radiating his barely restrained anger.

“Do I look like a fucking abuser?” Andrew growled.

Aaron held his hands up and took a step back, putting him dangerously close to the edge of the roof.

“No! No, of course not, Andrew—”

“Let me make this simple for you: I’m not interested in messing around with someone who doesn’t want me back. I don’t take what isn’t explicitly given. It’s called consent, asshole.”

Aaron shuffled back another step. “Okay, okay, I get it. Jesus.” He breathed in deeply and exhaled through his nose, his eyes fixed on Andrew’s. “This is crazy. I mean, I’m still trying to wrap my brain around you being into guys and into Rain.” Aaron shook his head and shrugged. “I just don’t see it, Andrew. He’s all Grateful Dead and you’re like, I don’t know, the fucking Offspring.”
Andrew rolled his eyes. “Because you and Katelyn are such a match made in heaven.” Aaron opened his mouth to protest but Andrew kept talking. “And before you ask, we’re not dating.”

Aaron blinked. “What?”

“It’s really not any of your business,” Andrew continued. “It’s… nothing.” He turned away from Aaron and leaned over to retrieve his pack of cigarettes. Talking about Rain was only ratcheting up his anxiety.

“Oh, come on!” Aaron practically yelled. “It’s definitely something! You’re obsessed with that kid. How many times have we been to that shitty smoke shop? You’ve been as irritable as a cat with fleas ever since Sunday when you took him home. If you’re going to lie to me then whatever but don’t lie to yourself.”

Andrew huffed out an exasperated sigh and thumbed at his lighter, which sparked ineffectually. He cursed quietly and shoved the cigarette and lighter back into the pack.

“Hey!” Aaron seized his shoulder and shook him roughly. It was the wrong move. Years spent in foster homes and juvie had taught Andrew many important lessons and had ingrained a host of reflexes. In that moment Andrew’s mind knew that it was his brother holding him, but muscle memory wasn’t as easily convinced. Andrew grabbed blindly for Aaron’s hand and wrist, twisting them back violently and working with Aaron’s delayed reaction to shove his brother away from him —

Aaron cried out as he fell back, his sprained wrist clutched to his chest, his other arm pin wheeling rapidly as his feet came up and his body lurched backwards over the edge.

“Aaron!” Thankfully Andrew’s reflexes were just as fast when it came to split second life and death situations. Andrew leapt forward and grabbed the front of Aaron’s shirt, pulling him to safety. They crashed onto the roof in a heap, both gasping. Aaron’s body shuddered and trembled as Andrew patted his arms and chest, making sure his twin was okay.

“Ow,” Aaron moaned. “You stupid bastard.” His words came out stuttered, his teeth chattering from shock. “Think you broke my wrist.”

“I did not,” Andrew replied. He carefully took Aaron’s wrist and examined it, feeling appalled that he had hurt his brother, that he had almost- almost- Andrew swallowed back the bile that surged up his throat.

“It might be sprained,” Andrew said. He let go of Aaron’s wrist and brushed his shaking fingers through his brother’s sweaty hair. “I’m sorry.”

“God,” Aaron muttered. “You almost killed me, Andrew. What the hell?”

“I didn’t mean—” Andrew felt too sick to formulate an excuse. There was no excuse. “I’m sorry. It was an accident. Do you believe me?”

Aaron managed to sit up. He stared at Andrew for a long minute, his expression shifting. “I do,” he finally said. He took a deep breath and held it. Another minute passed before Aaron spoke. “You know, we’ve never talked about what happened, before. Before we lived together.”

Andrew glared at his brother but kept the scalding words inside.

“There’s a lot I don’t know about you. Shit, I didn’t know you were gay until last week. And, despite what you might think, you don’t know much about me.” Andrew nodded once to show he
heard what Aaron was saying. Aaron rubbed at his wrist and continued. “What can I do to make this,” Aaron pointed back and forth between them, “better?”

Andrew stared at Aaron, not quite believing what he had just heard. “Dude, I just about threw you off a roof and you want to talk about it? You want to talk to me?”

“Shocking, I know,” Aaron said dryly. He tugged at his shirt and pulled the neck up to wipe sweat off his face. “Look, you’re stressed out and jumpy and frankly living with you right now feels like walking on egg shells while having fire ants in your pants. And I don’t know, but if talking about it would help then yeah, talk to me. Please.”

Andrew flinched at the word and sucked in his lips. He had an appointment with Bee on Thursday, a game on Friday. He was going to Pipe Dream tomorrow because Rain had failed to contact him in their agreed upon time frame and it was killing him not knowing what was happening to him. Maybe his fight with Aaron had shaken something loose but he found himself nodding.

“We can talk inside,” Andrew said, climbing to his feet. “It’s too hot to be out here much longer.” He held out a hand to Aaron who stared up at him with wide-eyed surprise before accepting his help.

“You should go see Abby afterwards, have her wrap your wrist. If you lose playing time because of this Kevin will never stop hounding us.”

Aaron gave him a wry half smile. “I’ll be sure to tell him it’s all your fault.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and headed for the door.

Once they were back in their dorm suite Andrew retrieved the bottle of Jack Daniels that they had stashed in the freezer, along with two glasses and some ice. His room was empty because Kevin was doing crunches and watching a game in the sitting area. Nicky was napping in the room he shared with Aaron. It was altogether too peaceful, completely at odds with Andrew’s inner turmoil.

Aaron pulled a beanbag into Andrew’s room and plopped into. Andrew fixed their drinks and handed a glass to Aaron. They clinked glasses out of habit and took a swallow. Andrew felt the bite of the whiskey bringing his thoughts into focus and took another drink. Then another. He poured another glass and Aaron watched with a bemused expression.

“I guess this is serious,” Aaron commented, draining his glass and holding it up for a refill.

They took their time on the second drink, sipping and unwinding. Andrew wasn’t eager to talk to his brother about anything, let alone his boy problems. If he could go back in time he would have opted to spar with Renee; physical confrontation was so much more therapeutic than regurgitating his issues out loud.

“So…” Aaron prompted after the silence had dragged on too long.

“So,” Andrew began, rolling his glass back and forth between his hands. “Rain is a runaway and he’s trapped living with the asshole who owns the smoke shop and likes to beat up on Rain and force him to sell drugs and do other stuff that he isn’t consenting to.” The words tumbled out of his mouth in a hurry. Aaron’s mouth dropped open and Andrew drained his glass again before continuing. “He can’t leave the man, Jason, because he has information about Rain’s past that he has threatened to use. If Rain is found by the people looking for him it will mean his death.” Andrew stood up and paced back and forth between the window and the door. “I can’t stop thinking about it. I’m trying to find a solution but it’s a perfect trap. Then I found out, to make matters worse, that there’s another player involved who…” Andrew almost gagged. “Who is doing some really messed up shit to Rain. So. That’s what’s going on.”
Aaron sagged into the beanbag and pressed his glass to his temples. His frown was a perfect match to Andrew’s.

“Not to sound harsh but what the fuck, Andrew? Did you have to fall for such a hopeless case?” Aaron’s pained look was the only thing that saved him from Andrew’s anger. Besides, his brother had a point.

“I would want to help him,” Andrew said evenly, “even if I hadn’t fallen for him. Which I haven’t.”

“Right. Sure,” Aaron snorted. “You don’t give a rat’s ass about anyone outside of the three men who live in this dorm and your psychiatrist. Listen, I hate that Rain is in this situation but as you said, it’s a perfect trap. You’re not going to win this one, Andrew.”

The weight of their shared past, the heavy burden of what had happened to their mother, settled in the space between them. Andrew had solved that problem. But Aaron was right; he couldn’t use those same methods to fix things for Rain.

“I’m not giving up on him,” Andrew said. It was terrifying to admit it out loud.

Aaron sighed and tapped his glass for a refill. Andrew poured until both their glasses were brimming. He settled onto his bed, the room looking hazy at the edges.

They didn’t talk much after that. Andrew was dimly aware that he was getting fairly close to drunk but he kept sipping at the whiskey. Day drinking on a Tuesday: desperate times, desperate measures. The alcohol wore at his emotions, blunting his panic, smothering his worries. He felt cold and distant and untouchable. Even when Kevin burst into the room and started yelling at them about practice Andrew simply gave him his best thousand-yard stare until Kevin left in a huff. Nicky peeked in and fretted, bringing water, and blanket for Aaron who had passed out on the beanbag.

Andrew slid his fingers over the condensation gathered on the cup of water Nicky had left with him. He drew patterns and, without thinking about it, traced the name Rain in steady cursive. He watched as the water beaded around the name before sliding down, until Rain’s name was gone. It felt like an omen. Andrew pushed the cup onto the floor and pulled the blankets over his head.

He hated this.
Andrew rubbed his forehead as he drove the familiar stretch of road leading from Palmetto State to Pipe Dream. His head was pounding thanks to all the drinking he and Aaron had done the day before. The chain smoking hadn’t helped either. He needed coffee or ice cream and a dark room. And Rain. Wouldn’t that be fucking ideal.

The lot in front of the smoke shop was empty though the spaces in front of the liquor store were full as usual. The tattoo shop looked deserted and the wing shack was closed; Andrew had never seen it open and was fairly sure it must be a front for some kind of shady business. With Pipe Dream next door that seemed more than probable.

Andrew got out of the car, his heart pounding and palms sweating, and walked towards the shop. He had no idea what or who he would confront on the other side of the glass door. He had no idea if Rain would be there and if Rain was— Andrew buried his worries and grabbed the handle of the door and pulled. The tired chime announced his entrance but the person at the counter didn’t sit up to greet him. Maybe they hadn’t heard the chime, the music – something that sounded vaguely like Indian trance – was pretty overwhelming.

From where he was standing Andrew wasn’t sure if the person at the counter was Rain or someone else. Whoever it was had their face pressed to the counter, hair and head hidden in a massive Grateful Dead hoodie. At least it wasn’t Jason; this person was far too small.

Andrew approached the counter and, unsure of what to do, knocked his knuckles on the glass countertop.

“Anyone home?” Andrew asked.

The person shot up, nearly falling off their stool. The hood tumbled backwards and Andrew breathed a sigh of relief. It was Rain.

“Oh!” Rain’s voice was quiet and raspy. “Andrew.” He hunched over, leaning across the counter, head tipped back to look up into Andrew’s face. “Hello.”

The enormous sunglasses that Rain was wearing completely masked about half his face, making it impossible for Andrew to read him. With slow, careful movements Andrew reached over and took off the shades.

“Fuck.” The word came out choked and Andrew had to work very hard to keep his tone and expression under control. “Rain, did Jason do this?”

Rain tried to cover his face with his hands but Andrew gently pulled his wrists down and studied the damage. Both eyes were bloodshot and the skin around them was bruised and swollen. Rain held
himself perfectly still as Andrew touched his face, rough fingers holding his chin and tilting his face side to side.

“Rain,” Andrew repeated. “I asked you a question.”

Rain shut his eyes and breathed. “Yes,” he finally answered. “Jason found out that I didn’t come back after Eden’s. He-,” Rain made a quiet gasping sound as he shifted on the stool. “He doesn’t like for me to run wild.”

“Did he hurt you anywhere else?” Andrew demanded. He was so angry he was almost shaking.

Rain looked like he was about to cry so Andrew decided to ease back on the interrogation. He walked around the counter and stood next to Rain, unsure of whether he should hug him or not; it depended on how hurt Rain was.

“What can I do?” Andrew asked.

“Hold me,” Rain said quietly.

Andrew did. Rain fit into his arms so well. It wasn’t that Rain was small, he wasn’t, at least, not in comparison to Andrew. He was lean where Andrew had muscle and bulk, but he wasn’t some tiny lost waif. However in this moment, in Rain’s beaten vulnerability he did seemed small and helpless. He wasn’t the same person that Andrew had kissed on Sunday, that he had seen dancing at Eden’s or threatening perverts in the shop. What had happened?

Andrew ran his fingers through Rain’s purple curls, frowning when he touched a patch of tacky hair. His fingers came away with a coating of mostly congealed blood. Rain whimpered a little as Andrew probed the wound; he shivered and buried his face against Andrew’s chest.

“Fuck,” Andrew swore. “Did this happen today?”

“Y-yes,” Rain stuttered. His teeth were chattering. He touched the edge of the counter with shaking fingers. “I hit my head.”

Andrew pulled Rain closer. “Tell me what really happened.”

Rain made a pained noise. “Jason slapped me and I pulled away so he wouldn’t do it again. I thought if I got out here, to the floor, that he would stop. But he grabbed my shirt and I was still trying to get away. The shirt ripped and I lost my balance and fell.” Rain touched the side of his head. “I blacked out.” Andrew kissed Rain’s fingers and his forehead while Rain blinked back tears. “Andrew, there was so much blood. I freaked. It reminded me of—well. And Jason kept yelling and kicking me. But finally he stopped and he had me take these pills.”

Rain looked up again and Andrew registered just how wide and dark his pupils were. Drugged. Rain was fucking drugged. Which explained why this tough as nails kid was coming undone in his arms.

“Shit. God fucking damn it,” Andrew growled. “You probably have a concussion. And I can’t take you anywhere… you’re high as a fucking kite, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Rain groaned.

“Shhh,” Andrew shushed him. “It’s not your fault. Okay? The black eyes, was that on Sunday?” Rain nodded a little, wincing. “Alright. Look, there’s someone I know who could come take a look at you, to make sure you don’t need a hospital. You probably need stitches.”
Rain paled and grabbed the front of Andrew’s shirt. “No.”

“Well, I hear you,” Andrew protested. “She’s the team doctor. She’s seen everything and she knows how to keep her mouth shut—”

Rain pushed out of Andrew’s arms and stood on unsteady feet. “I said no.” Before Andrew could interrupt Rain forged ahead, his pain masked by a fear so profound that Andrew felt chilled. “You think this is bad, Andrew? Did you not see the fucking scars on my body?” Rain plucked at the hoodie, his dark, drugged gaze fixed on Andrew. “I have survived so much worse. Yeah I feel like shit right now and I’m not thinking straight and I probably do have a concussion but you know what a little house call from your doctor friend will get me? Dead. Because she won’t be able to close her eyes to this, she’ll try to interfere and then Jason tells my father right where I am. And he’ll kill me. But he’ll also come after anyone connected to me. Think that over, Andrew. No one is getting killed because of me. So you can either stay with me and be the only bright spot in my day or you can leave.”

Rain was panting slightly, his face flushed and sweaty, and only his death grip on the counter was keeping him upright. Andrew had never seen him this angry or scared and he felt a thousand times worse for having upset Rain. Maybe it was the drugs that had Rain wound up, some kind of paranoia side effect, maybe it was his injuries, but Andrew knew he had lost this fight. He met Rain’s eyes and nodded once before sitting down on the stool and holding his arms out.

Rain nearly fell into him, limp and shaking. A mess. Andrew hauled Rain onto his lap so that Rain was straddling him, chest pressed heavily against Andrew’s chest. Andrew rubbed his back lightly, remembering that underneath the hoodie Rain was probably patterned with bruises.

The hoodie smelled like incense and pot and cigarettes. Andrew knew without asking that it belonged to Jason. Rain’s shirt, wherever it was, was most likely coated in his blood. As Andrew rocked Rain and played with his hair he noticed the chemical smell of bleach and the dark crescents of dried blood around Rain’s fingernails; tiny flakes of blood coated his ear. It was a small miracle that Rain hadn’t been hurt worse. All the worst case scenarios flashed through Andrew’s mind, each one more bloody and awful than the one before.

They didn’t talk. At some point Rain fell asleep, long after Andrew’s legs had lost feeling and his arms had started to feel numb. Rain wasn’t huge but he wasn’t light either. No one entered the shop and no one called. The Indian music switched over at some point to eerie chanting. Andrew tried to be in the moment like Bee had often told him to be. But her mindfulness techniques couldn’t overcome the relentless pressure of Rain’s circumstances. Andrew obsessed over plans and plots but none of them could circumvent Jason. He gnawed at the inside of his cheek and worried over the problem. What was he going to do? What was he going to do?

After about an hour Rain woke up. He had left an impressive amount of drool on Andrew’s shoulder but he didn’t seem embarrassed by it. He blinked sleepily, yawning and stretching like a cat. Andrew, who was essentially dead from the waist down, scowled as Rain rearranged himself on his lap.

“Good nap?” Andrew asked sarcastically.

Rain nodded. “Best sleep I’ve had since your place.” He nuzzled the side of Andrew’s neck, his warm breath tickling. “If I could sleep in your arms every night—”

Andrew lightly flicked Rain’s shoulder. “Don’t say stupid things,” he grumbled.

Rain giggled and hummed a song before quietly singing under his breath “Wouldn’t it be nice if we
could wake up/In the morning when the day is new?/And after having spent the day together/Hold each other close the whole night through…"

“God, you are such a fucking hippie,” Andrew complained before pulling Rain in for a kiss.

“You like it,” Rain grinned. His eyes were getting back to normal and that was a good sign.

“Your Jedi mind tricks have no effect on me,” Andrew replied using his best deadpan expression.

Rain looked like someone had switched his wires for a moment but then he started laughing, far more than what the joke called for.

“Did you just,” Rain gasped between laughs, “make a Star Wars joke? Who are you?”

Andrew shrugged. “I do more than play exy and drink and frown, you know.”

“I don’t know,” Rain said, poking Andrew’s chest for emphasis, “but I want to. I want to know everything about you. Tell me something.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, something nice. Surprise me.”

Andrew shifted, his legs aching for him to stand and move. “Okay,” he mused. “How about this?” He couldn’t believe he was about to say this but Rain needed it so… “I know the next verse in that song.”

Rain gasped theatrically. “No way!” Andrew nodded. “Sing it for me.”

Andrew couldn’t help but blush because it was so goddamn embarrassing. But Rain was injured and trapped and they had this moment, this tiny, perfect moment. How many more times would they get to be together like this?

With a deep sigh Andrew ducked his head down until his lips brushed Rain’s ear. His voice wasn’t the best so he kept it low and quiet, the words sounding more like a prayer than an upbeat pop song: “Happy times together we’ve been spending/I wish that every kiss was never ending/Wouldn’t it be nice?”

Rain was smiling so wide that he looked like he might hurt himself. “That was beautiful.”

Andrew’s face was burning, his ears were burning. “Shut up.”

“Nuh-uh. Tell me where you learned the Beach Boys.” Rain draped his arms around Andrew’s shoulders and pressed their foreheads together. His bruised eyes were ghastly but his smile was sweet. Andrew let Rain kiss him, let him push his fingers through his hair. His own fingers were splayed over Rain’s lower back, keeping him secure on his lap.

“I grew up in California,” Andrew explained. “I heard the Beach Boys a lot. They’re not my kind of music but they’re catchy.”

“Hmm.” Rain played with the hair at the nape of Andrew’s neck. “Where in California? I spent some time in LA, I think I told you that already.”

“The belly button/tattoo people, right?” Rain nodded. “I never got around to LA. I think I would have liked it.” Andrew’s fingers tapped out a nervous tempo on Rain’s back. His chest felt tight as he revealed a little more truth. “I grew up in the foster care system. Went through a lot of homes. Ended
up in juvie before I moved to South Carolina. It’s not a happy story.”

Rain frowned, hands resting on Andrew’s shoulders. There was a weight to his gaze that made Andrew feel so seen. It was utterly ridiculous that he was confessing so much to this stranger, this dangerous, endangered enigma of a boy. Everything about Rain was unpredictable and it was making Andrew take chances, to dare greatly.

“I want to know your story, unhappy or not,” Rain said. “But no pressure.”

“I do owe you some truth,” Andrew admitted. “After all, you told me a lot this weekend.”

Rain wrinkled his nose. “Can’t believe that was only a few days ago. Whenever I’m with you it’s like a reprieve. Or a dream. Over too soon.” Tears pricked at the corners of Rain’s eyes and he went to sweep them away and grimaced as his knuckles made contact with his swollen skin. “Oh, fuck.”

“Let me.” Rain closed his eyes and Andrew brushed the side of his finger under Rain’s lashes, collecting the tears. “You’re a mess,” he murmured, lips grazing each eyelid. Rain choked out a small laugh. “The best kind.”

“I wish you could stay,” Rain sighed. “I wish we had forever.”

“I know.” Andrew did know. He thought back to his conversation with Aaron, of his denial that he had fallen for Rain. Fuck. It was easy to say that from a distance but right here, right now, with Rain nestled against him, he couldn’t lie to himself. There was no coming back from this one.

When it was time for Andrew to leave – when he could no longer ignore the text reminders from Kevin about practice – Rain was almost back to a normal state; no longer reeling from drugs or pain. Andrew got up and nearly fell over, his legs dead asleep. The pins and needles feeling of them waking up was embarrassingly agonizing; Andrew swore loudly and creatively as he hobbled around and Rain, the ungrateful urchin, had the nerve to laugh at him.

They parted at the door, Rain hanging off Andrew’s arm, enticing one kiss after another.

“Call me,” he breathed against Andrew’s mouth.

“Won’t you get in trouble?”

“I’ll be good, so good Jason won’t suspect,” Rain tried to assure him but it didn’t make Andrew feel better.

“I can’t risk it,” Andrew said. “You call me. I’ll pick up. No matter what time.”

“Okay.”

One more kiss and then he would leave.

“We’ll see you in Columbia?” Andrew asked.

“Perhaps,” Rain answered. “Until next time, listen to some Beach Boys and think of me fondly.”

“Hippie,” Andrew said and pulled out of Rain’s arms.

In the hot car Andrew rested his head on the steering wheel, letting the suffocating heat bake him inside and out. His chest hurt so bad and his stomach ached. He had only been this powerless and hopeless once in his life, and it had nearly killed him. He started the car and tore out of the lot, pressing the accelerator down and going faster and faster. He wanted to ask Aaron, Dan, Matt, or
even Nicky—was falling supposed to hurt like this?

Chapter End Notes

FYI: song lyrics are from the Beach Boys song “Wouldn’t It Be Nice.” Also, I made a playlist of songs that Rain would probably listen to. It’s very eclectic but mostly old school if you want to check it out:
https://dkafterdark.tumblr.com/post/166580740751/pipedream
The team had an away game on Friday and Andrew stressed every single minute that they were out of state. He was grateful for Wymack’s policy about away games, where they didn’t stay the night but drove home immediately after the game. He sprawled out on the backseat during the ride back, cell phone clutched in one hand while he mindlessly ate his way through a family size bag of Skittles.

The team was pretty amped up from their win and Kevin and Dan were shouting back and forth about what tactics had worked best, what plays needed some adjusting. Seth and Allison were locked at the lips. Aaron was texting Katelyn. Matt and Renee and Nicky were swapping ideas for what to do for the rest of the weekend. Andrew felt even more disconnected from his teammates—they were all celebrating and enjoying life and he… he was wound tight, plotting murder and disappearances and fuck all. After seeing Rain on Wednesday his anxiety had been through the roof and it was taking all of his tremendous willpower not to snap at everyone.

The only plus side to Andrew’s situation, at least from Kevin’s point of view, was that Andrew was playing with laser sharp focus. He kept the goal locked down the entire game, taking out his mounting frustrations by playing more aggressively. Wymack had noticed but, unlike Kevin, he found Andrew’s focus to be more alarming than positive.

“No,” Andrew replied and brushed past Wymack so he could go smoke a few cigarettes before the ride back. He had stared up at the moon and let the nicotine settle his nerves. If all went well he would see Rain at Eden’s and they could… well, they probably wouldn’t be able to talk. But he could see him and keep him safe, even if it was just for a few hours.

“Hey! Andrew!” Nicky yelled from a couple rows up. “We’re trying to decide what to do for fall break. Got any ideas?”

Andrew sat up and leaned over the seat in front of him. Renee watched him with wide, expectant eyes. Andrew chewed on a mouthful of Skittles and thought about it.

“How about a hostage rescue mission?” he answered. Matt rolled his eyes and Nicky looked confused. “Or we could go visit one of those islands with no extradition and never come back.” He collapsed back onto the seat before they had time to reply but he heard Matt say something that sounded like “fucking weirdo.”

Renee came back and sat next to Andrew and stole a handful of Skittles, popping them one by one into her mouth. Andrew glowered at the theft but didn’t say anything.

“I take it things with Rain haven’t improved,” Renee said, pitching her voice so that no one else would hear her.
“They have not,” Andrew said, popping the joints in his fingers and feeling a little satisfaction from the sharp *crack pop*.

“What are we going to do?” Renee’s eyes shifted from soft and concerned to cold and calculating. It was an impressive transformation.

“I don’t know,” Andrew confessed. “The situation is worse than I thought. To be honest it seems like the best solution is to pull a Romeo and Juliet.” Renee quirked her eyebrow at that. “You know, fake his death. It’s kind of perfect, actually…” Andrew gnawed at his thumb and tried to think of the logistics. “Overdose? Exploding car?”

“If you do exploding car you’ll need another body,” Renee mused. “And if these people are thorough, which it sounds like they are, you’ll have to ensure the body is totally destroyed.” She sighed and ate some more Skittles. “This may be above our pay grade.”

“Okay, but an overdose?” Andrew prodded. “Like he could take something to make him appear dead but he’s not?”

Renee gave Andrew a pitying look. “That won’t fly. If he’s discovered and presumed dead then, best-case scenario, his body is sent back to whoever wants him so bad. Worst case scenario they might dispose of the body on site and we’ll have no control over how that happens. Dismemberment? Dissolved in acid?” Andrew winced. “Sorry, Andrew, but if they’re really as smart and dangerous as you believe them to be these types of things need to be taken into consideration. The best way to fake a death is to do it so that no body is ever recovered.”

“I hate this,” Andrew muttered. “I’m this close to kidnapping him and hiding him in my dorm room forever.”

Renee shook her head. “You act like he’s a stray cat.”

“Hmm. That’s actually sort of accurate,” Andrew said. “If he wasn’t tied up with the fucking mob…”

Renee paled. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What? The *mob*?” She glanced up front to make sure no one was listening. “Andrew Minyard, are you serious?”

“I don’t know which mob, but his captor is involved with some larger criminal organization. Hence the complexity of freeing him.”

Renee leaned over and pressed her forehead to her knees and started whispering, her hands clasped over the top of her head. Andrew cocked his head to the side and regarded her in confusion.

“Renee,” he nudged her thigh with his shoe. “Are you okay? Are you freaking out?”

“Shhh,” Renee whispered. “I’m praying for guidance.”

Andrew rolled his eyes and went back to eating Skittles. Prayers and *please* had never solved any of his problems. Where was God when he was seven? When he was living with Cass? Where was God *now* when Rain was going through hell? The old anger burned in his chest and he clenched his hands into fists. Rain and Renee and Nicky might believe in a benevolent God but Andrew was fucking convinced that they were all on their own. He rolled over and faced the back of the seat and pretended to sleep, his phone cradled against his chest.

—–
Andrew thought about Rain’s conundrum all the way back to Palmetto. He needed to make Rain disappear and then he would go after Jason. Once Jason was out of the picture – and with Rain missing – hopefully the threat against Rain’s life would be lifted. The trick would be spiriting Rain away. Jason was part of a larger network and had more resources than Andrew, including (most likely) contacts within the local law enforcement. Taking Rain from Pipe Dream would be almost impossible. Snatching him from Eden’s was more plausible but Andrew didn’t like the proximity to his family or to the fact that he and Rain had been seen together at Eden’s. That left a handful of other clubs in Columbia; he could get a list from Rain and try to plot out how this kidnapping would go down. Afterwards he planned to stash Rain at the Columbia house. It wasn’t ideal but it was the best he could do on short notice.

During his planning session he considered contacting Higgins again but didn’t think it was worth the risk. The officer, despite his many flaws, was tenacious and if he thought Andrew was getting mixed up in more trouble he would find a way to interfere instead of help. Interfering, after all, was what he did best. At the very least he would have to tell Aaron and Nicky and Kevin; the Columbia house was their retreat as well, he and Aaron’s shared home, and his group would need to know why Rain was staying there.

Andrew paced around the room, earning annoyed comments from Kevin who was working on his term paper. Andrew’s stack of course work for the weekend remained untouched. Outside of practice and games he felt like he was losing touch of everything else. He knew Bee would say that his behavior was unhealthy. Maybe it was. But all he could think about was helping Rain. Schoolwork could wait.

“For fuck’s sake Andrew,” Kevin snapped. “Go smoke or get ice cream but for the love of God stop pacing! You’re making me anxious.”

Andrew snatched up his cigarettes and gave Kevin a cool look before leaving the room and heading to the roof. He passed through the common area, interrupting Nicky and Aaron’s game of Mario Kart. He ignored Nicky’s invitation to join the game, ignored Aaron’s questioning look. He and Aaron might be working towards communication but he didn’t have time for it right now.

Up on the roof Andrew pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Rain’s number. He walked along the edge of the roof, his balance steady, and listened to the dial tone. Finally Rain answered.

“Andrew?”

“Hey, Sunshine.”

The happiness in Rain’s voice was unmistakable. “I was just thinking about you!”

“Good things?”

“Always.”

Andrew smiled to himself and hopped off the ledge and sat, swinging his legs over the edge.

“Did you win last night?” Rain asked.

Andrew nodded even though Rain couldn’t see him. “Yeah. I kept the goal locked down.”

“The entire game?” Rain sounded impressed.

“Renee had some time in the goal,” Andrew conceded. “I could have gone the whole time but Coach tries to give us breaks when he can.”
“Yeah,” Rain’s voice faded out and there was a rustling sound. “Your team is really small, right?”

“Just the nine of us,” Andrew answered, wondering what Rain was doing that was making so much noise. “We barely have enough players to qualify.”

“Uh-huh.” The sound of a sink running, doors opening and closing. “I wish I could see you play.”

“Yeah,” Andrew mumbled and then, “What the hell are you doing?”

“What?” Rain’s voice echoed. “Sorry, I’m getting ready for tonight. Takes a lot of work to look this good.” The self-deprecation in Rain’s tone made Andrew roll his eyes. “I don’t know where Jason finds these clothes.”

Knowing that Jason picked out Rain’s club outfits made Andrew sick. He lit up another cigarette and took in a deep lungful of smoke.

“Probably Hot Topic,” Andrew said.

Rain laughed a little. “Yeah, probably. Though this shirt looks like Lisa Frank threw up all over it.”

“You’ll be easy to pick out, then. I’ll just look for the guy wearing a shirt covered in psychedelic kittens.”

“That’s surprisingly accurate,” Rain joked. “These pants though.” There was the sound of Rain hopping up and down. “Are too damn tight. I think I need Vaseline or butter to get these on. Absolute murder on my junk.”

“Sounds like you need me to come over and thwart that murder,” Andrew teased.

Rain scoffed. “Are you trying to get in my pants, Andrew Minyard? That’s the worst pickup line I’ve heard.”

Andrew stretched on the roof and squinted up at the clouds. “I’ll have to think of something better.”

“You do that,” Rain said. “I’ll see you at Eden’s later tonight. It’s my last stop and my driver says he’ll give me some playtime.”

Andrew listened while Rain continued prepping for a night out. He didn’t want to hang up the phone but he didn’t know what to say either. It was too risky to discuss Rain’s situation over the phone—it was bad enough that they were taking this chance when, at any moment, Jason might come back.

“Andrew? You still there?” Rain asked after several minutes.

“Yeah.” The word came out too quiet.

“Okay, I have to go but I’ll see you soon.” The longing in Rain’s voice was killing him.

“See you,” Andrew replied, holding the phone next to his face even though the call was already disconnected. Why was he so god damn stupid?

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Eden’s was its usual dark, pulsing brand of hedonism by the time Rain arrived. Andrew was lounging next to Kevin in one of the booths on the upper level. He had been drinking steadily, riding the line between buzzed and intoxicated. Kevin was moodily texting, his pretty face lit by the screen’s white light. Nicky came up to join them, his shirt soaked through with sweat and a huge
smile on his face.

“Just saw your boy!” Nicky called out and flopped next to Andrew.

Andrew raised his eyebrow. “He’s not my boy,” he objected.

“Okay,” Nicky grinned and took a shot. “Anyways, he’s downstairs. Or he was. I think he went into one of the offices. Shady, right?”

Andrew heaved out of his seat and pushed Nicky towards Kevin. “You’re on Day duty. Don’t do anything stupid.”

The crowd on the dance floor was a heaving, groping mass that Andrew skirted around on his way to the back. He exchanged a brief nod with Roland.

“You see where Rain went?” he asked the bartender.

“Boss’s office,” Roland answered. “But give him a minute, Andrew.” Andrew glared at Roland until he added, “I think they’re doing business. You know management doesn’t like being interrupted.”

Andrew did know. Eden’s, in a lot of ways, was a haven for him and his group but that didn’t mean it was perfect or safe. You could get just about anything you wanted here and many of the sketchier deals took place in the back. It wasn’t Andrew’s problem except now Rain was back there and his mind kept replaying Rain’s words he wants me to play nice.

Waiting at the bar meant being jostled by drunk people coming back for round 5, 6, 7, and running the risk of being puked on. Andrew kept his head on a swivel, checking on the office door, on Kevin and Nicky, on Aaron and Katelyn. The other Foxes were under Renee’s protection so he didn’t bother with them.

After waiting about ten agonizing minutes Rain finally emerged from the office. He was stumbling a bit and looked pretty gone. Andrew pushed through the crowd, shoving people out of his way before Rain could disappear again. Rain saw him coming and perked up, smiling and trying to speed up his unsteady pace.

Andrew caught Rain just as he tripped; all of Rain’s weight came crashing into him but Andrew didn’t budge.

“Whoa!” Rain gasped, his hands latching onto Andrew’s biceps. “You’re strong!”

Andrew rolled his eyes. “You’re drunk.”

Rain hiccupped. “I’m a little drunk. Ha. Get it?”

“You’re hilarious, c’mon. Let’s go get you some Gatorade.” Andrew pulled Rain into the staff room, startling a couple of the employees who were on break. “Get out,” Andrew demanded. He knew one of the guys from when he and Nicky and Aaron had worked at Eden’s; the guy grabbed his coworker’s arm and led her away. The dude was smart enough to know not to mess with Andrew but the woman gave him a nasty look and flipped him off.

“Here, have a seat.” Andrew eased Rain into one of the recently vacated chairs and plundered the fridge for Gatorade and grabbed some packs of crackers from the table. “Drink. Eat.”

Rain wrinkled his nose at the snacks. “You’re no fun.”
“I’m lots of fun,” Andrew corrected, opening the Gatorade for Rain. “But if you want to have any fun with me or even a decent conversation I need you sober, or at least not wasted.”

“Not wasted,” Rain complained but he guzzled half the Gatorade and started working on the crackers.

“How did your meeting go?” Andrew asked. He got up to make some coffee, which was for round two of Operation Sober Up Rain Storm.

“Good.” Rain hiccupped again. “Didn’t have to do nothing this time. Just a drop off.”

“You were in there a long time for a drop off,” Andrew commented. He hated himself for being curious… and for being jealous. Whatever Rain had to do didn’t change things between them but it still bothered him. Deeply.

“Hmmm.” Rain finished up the Gatorade and blinked sleepily. “Sometimes I don’t have to do anything but…” he shook his head and looked down at the table, “but sometimes people like to touch so I play nice. That’s all.”

“And if you don’t?” Andrew’s voice was hoarse with anger.

“They send a bad report to Jason. It’s stupid. I’m a courier, a messenger, not a… a toy. It’s like they don’t think I’m a person, you know? But once I get enough drinks in me I don’t care or I think it’s just a game or that it’s not happening to me. You know?”

Andrew did.

“So yeah, that’s kind of how my night went.” Rain tipped his head back and looked at Andrew through a curtain of purple curls. He wasn’t crying but his eyes were glassy and his nose was red. He sniffed a couple times and shoved his fingers through his hair. “What have you been up to?”

Andrew poured two mugs of coffee and sat down next to Rain. “Keeping my crew out of trouble. Waiting for you.”

Rain took the mug from Andrew’s hand and blew on the coffee, sending whirls of steam towards Andrew. “Worth the wait?”

Andrew brushed his hand over Rain’s messy hair. “Always.”

“You’re too fucking sweet,” Rain grinned.

“Please.” Andrew poured six packets of sugar into his coffee before taking a sip.

“Hey, I’ve got some good news, for once.” Andrew gave Rain a skeptical look. “Let’s hear it.”

“Jason is having me work at a small music festival next weekend. It’s some place near the Smoky Mountains. They’re gonna have bluegrass music and jam bands. You know, perfect for hippie stoners.”

“Perfect for you, Rain Storm.” Andrew nudged Rain’s shoe with his boot.

“Yep! And… I can get you and your crew in, if you want.” Rain’s smile should be illegal. It was way too attractive.
“We could come,” Andrew hedged, “but won’t Jason be there?”

“Well, yeah. But he said he’d give me some free time since I’ve been so good. I haven’t been out of Columbia in months so I’m really looking forward to this. Will you come?”

Andrew thought about it. Logistically this would be the best time and place to snatch Rain because they would be in the mountains: no security cameras, limited cell and data service, lots of people. By the time Jason realized that Rain was gone they could be halfway back to Columbia. Then all he would have to do was keep Rain hidden in the backseat under some blankets so that no traffic cameras picked him up. It was totally doable.

“Yeah, yeah we’ll be there,” Andrew said. “Now let me tell you about my plan…”

They stayed in the break room while Andrew outlined his rough plan for Rain’s rescue. Rain was worried that Jason would immediately contact his father but Andrew reasoned that Jason would be too cautious to approach Rain’s father with empty hands and admit that he had lost his son because that would mean revealing that he had been hoarding Rain all along. This seemed to reassure Rain. Andrew didn’t tell Rain about his second plan: to kill Jason once Rain was safely stowed at the house. Only Renee needed to know about that plan.

“So what now?” Rain asked. Their coffee was gone and Rain was looking clear-eyed and sober. Andrew shrugged. “Wanna make out or dance or…?” Rain raised his eyebrows suggestively.

“Are you sure?” Andrew asked. “Not to prod an open wound, but after what you’ve already been through tonight… I’m cool with just talking.”

“Yeah but I miss you,” Rain frowned. “I get that you might not be interested. I mean it’s gross right? Me being passed around and—”

Andrew pressed his palm over Rain’s mouth. “You’re not gross. That’s not it at all. I’m worried, okay? I want you to want this and not because you’re half drunk or to prove something to me—”

Rain copied Andrew and shoved his hand over Andrew’s mouth. It was almost comical, the two of them at a stalemate, shutting each other up. At least verbally. Rain’s expressive eyes were saying a lot. Andrew dropped his hand onto Rain’s thigh and waited.

“I want you to kiss me,” Rain said. “And I want to kiss you back. That’s what I want, Andrew. How about you?”

Andrew pulled Rain’s hand from his mouth and gently kissed the back of it, then the palm and Rain’s wrist, moving slowly, kissing his way up Rain’s arm to his elbow, his shoulder, licking at the goosebumps that rose on Rain’s skin, tasting the salt of dried sweat.

“I told you not to say stupid things,” Andrew reprimanded, his lips hovering over Rain’s. “Of course I want you.”

Rain kissed him with an urgency that made Andrew’s heart pound, that had him tugging at Rain’s hair and – after coming up for air – pressing hungry, open-mouth kisses over his throat. Andrew was careful not to bite or suck, to leave Rain unmarked just like he found him. Rain was under no such restraint. He crawled onto Andrew’s lap and kissed him until both their mouths were dark red. He sucked at the side of Andrew’s neck and it was almost too much; Andrew closed his eyes and squeezed Rain’s hips, his fingers digging into the tight shirt that Rain was wearing. His moan startled both of them and Rain sat up, grinning mischievously.

“That was nice, right?” he asked, voice husky.
“You’re impossible,” Andrew replied and kissed him.

It was Roland who broke up their makeout session. He gave Andrew two sleazy thumbs up before turning to Rain. “There’s some guy at the bar looking for you. He said, and I quote, ‘Playtime’s over.’ Sorry to bust up the party.” Roland tapped his wrist and ducked out of the room.

“Oh shit,” Rain hissed. He scooted off Andrew’s lap and tried adjusting his clothes. Andrew couldn’t help but smile at Rain’s flustered state.

“I see what you meant about those pants,” he commented.

“What?” Rain snapped, pulling at his ridiculous kitten-covered shirt.

“Murder on the junk.”

“Oh, shut up, you!” Rain replied, blushing even more.

Saying goodbye wasn’t easy and letting Rain go was an exercise in willpower. Rain left the room alone, anxious to preserve appearances, and Andrew waited one long minute before following him. He stood at the back of the club and watched Rain’s slim figure vanish into the crowd.

One week. They had to make it through one more week and then… Andrew bit down on an evil smile. In one week Jason would realize that he had messed with the wrong boy.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

TW for brief panic attack scenes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The music festival, it turned out, was a small event that relied on word of mouth advertising. Andrew had spent an hour searching for the Sweet Wood Music Festival and found nothing helpful but lots of inappropriate images that made Nicky nearly spit up his bowl of Fruit Loops when he saw them.

“What the hell, Andrew?” Nicky gasped, his cereal bowl clutched to his chest. “I had no idea you were into this.”

Andrew folded his laptop screen down and stared blankly at Nicky. That tactic usually worked but this time Nicky wasn’t backing down.

“It’s okay, you know, if you’re questioning things,” Nicky started, “you can always talk to me if you’re feeling confused or if—”

“That’s not happening,” Andrew cut him off. “I’m researching the music festival that Rain invited us to. It’s some hippie, bluegrass thing, not a kinky porn fest or whatever.”

Kevin sauntered into the kitchenette, shirtless and with the waistband of his sweatpants riding entirely too low for decency. “Did someone say kinky porn fest?”

Andrew grabbed his computer and mug of coffee and left the kitchen while Nicky had another cereal related accident.

The address Rain had given him for the festival was in a rural area on the edge of Asheville, North Carolina. It was private property owned by someone who apparently really loved having hundreds of people show up and play music, camp, and party for an entire weekend. Andrew studied the paper roadmap of North Carolina, compared it to the map on Google, but neither one provided more than a green area. There was only one road to and from the event location, probably unpaved, and from there it was a series of small blue lines on the map until the roads led back to I-26. The drive up would take roughly two hours, if Andrew didn’t get lost, make any stops, and went the speed limit.

Andrew tipped his chair back and stared out the window of his dorm room. He had told the others about the music festival when they had gone to Waffle House for their traditional post-partying hangover breakfast on Sunday. Aaron had immediately agreed to go, much to Nicky and Kevin’s surprise. Kevin grudgingly agreed but he didn’t have much of a choice; where Andrew went, there Kevin would go. Nicky, of course, was 100% on board with a group road trip and a weekend away, especially if they were getting pot. On the ride back from Columbia Aaron had rode shotgun, leaving Kevin and Nicky to nap in the back, and attempted to grill Andrew on the festival invite.

“The plan,” Andrew had told him, “is simple. We go. We have a good time. I get Rain. We leave. Rain will stay at the Columbia house until I’ve neutralized the threat against him.”

“Neutralize the threat?” Aaron had snarled. “You’re not the fucking CIA, Andrew. How the fuck do
you plan to take out Jason and dismantle his post-death revenge fuckery?”

“Keep your voice down,” Andrew had hissed, checking to make sure that Kevin and Nicky were still asleep. “Renee’s going to help. Trust me, I know what I’m doing.”

Aaron shook his head, his expression clearly frustrated. “You don’t know. This is way too big for you, for any of us. We should tell Higgins or—”

“Shut up, Aaron,” Andrew snapped. “I’ve thought about this longer than you have and we can’t tell anyone. Best case scenario Rain goes into protective custody and he still might be found because his dad is a nasty motherfucker. Worst case scenario the news leaks and Rain gets dead and all of us, too.”

“So what do we tell them?” Aaron cocked his head towards the back seat where Nicky and Kevin were slumped against each other snoring. Nicky was drooling on Kevin’s shirt.

“I’ll tell them the truth,” Andrew said. “I’m not going to lie to them.”

Aaron tried propping his feet up on the dash and Andrew smacked his shins until he removed his feet. Aaron flipped off Andrew and sat in moody silence for several minutes. Finally he sighed and grumbled, “I can’t believe you’re putting us all in jeopardy over a guy you’re crushing on.”

Andrew squeezed the steering wheel to keep from smacking Aaron again. “You would do it for Katelyn.”

“I love Katelyn!” Aaron had yelled. Nicky stirred, blinking and wiping his mouth, and Andrew shot a murderous glare at his twin. Aaron had glared right back but he let the conversation drop.

It was Thursday now and, Andrew hated to admit it, he would need to talk to Kevin and Nicky about all of this; he couldn’t put off the conversation any longer. He desperately wanted to call Rain and find out how he was doing, listen to his easy-going voice as he rambled on about eccentric customers, his favorite communes, or why tie-dye was a legitimate clothing option. But Rain was en route to Asheville where he and Jason would be setting up for the festival. For the time being they had to be on radio silence. The next time he would get a chance to talk to Rain would be at the festival. The plan was to drive up Saturday morning, hang out and wait until Rain had some free time, and then make a run for it. Andrew drummed his fingers against the chair and sighed. He needed a smoke.

Nicky and Kevin were still in the kitchen and Kevin was lecturing Nicky about eating Fruit Loops and Nicky was telling Kevin that all gay men were required to eat Fruit Loops on a daily basis to maintain an optimal level of gayness.

“Quit making excuses for your bad eating habits!” Kevin answered before chugging a green smoothie he had concocted. “Eating Fruit Loops does not make you gay!”

“How would you know?” Nicky scoffed. “Have you eaten any Fruit Loops, Kevin? Hmmm?” He grabbed a handful of dry cereal and tried putting it in Kevin’s smoothie.

Andrew watched for about a minute before they realized that he was there. Nicky immediately stopped pestering Kevin and shoved the cereal in his mouth.

“wann doin noffin” Nicky said, his words garbled. He held up his hands in a gesture of innocence.

“He’s trying to make me gay!” Kevin shouted before breaking down into giggles. His obscenely chiseled abs clenched as he laughed and Andrew felt his patience eroding bit by bit. He slipped a
cigarette out of his pack and went to the window, sliding it open before lighting up.

Kevin and Nicky instantly stopped cutting up and their expression grew serious. Andrew’s silence coupled by a cigarette was a sign that shit was about to get real.

Andrew waited until he had finished the cigarette to speak. Then he proceeded to tell them about Rain and his scheme to save him. By the time he was finished Nicky’s mouth was hanging open and Kevin was vehemently shaking his head.

“Thoughts?” Andrew asked. He was already dying for another cigarette or a cup of coffee but he refrained. He had had his turn, now Kevin and Nicky would get theirs.

“No, no, no,” Kevin protested. “How could you—” His breathing was getting too fast and his face was too pale. “After the Moriyamas—”

Andrew went to Kevin and grabbed the back of his neck, forcing his head down between his knees. “Breathe, Kevin,” Andrew commanded. “C’mon, take it slow and breathe. We’re safe here. You’re safe.”

Nicky watched, his arms folded over his chest, and his forehead creased. Kevin’s gasps gradually faded and soon he was breathing normally. Andrew let him sit up and examined Kevin’s face and checked his pulse until he was satisfied that the panic attack had been averted.

“I helped you settle things with the Moriyamas,” Andrew said, keeping his voice calm and even. “Remember that? I went into that hell hole when they tried to take you back and I got you out, you and Jean.”


“I remember.” Kevin’s voice trembled. “I’ll never forget it, any of it.” His red rimmed green eyes glared at Andrew. “You promised to keep me safe, Andrew, but here you are bringing this problem into our lives like that promise doesn’t matter.”

“I thought,” Andrew said slowly, “that out of any of us, you would understand what it’s like to be owned, to live under a very real deadline.” He poked the tattoo under Kevin’s eye, making him flinch back.

“I do understand,” Kevin pleaded. “I hate it for Rain but he’s not our problem.”

“You,” Andrew pointed out, “were not my problem, either. I had Aaron and I had Nicky, my family, my blood. I brought you into this family and I kept you safe. I made you my problem. Now I’m making Rain my problem.”

Kevin groaned like the words were actually causing him pain. He slumped over in his seat and buried his face in his hands.

Nicky chewed on his bottom lip and kept his eyes fixed on Kevin’s quivering back. It had been a long time since either of them had seen Kevin this messed up. Kevin was usually okay, unless they had to play the Ravens or he saw an upsetting interview with Riko or Tetsuji. Andrew hoped his anxiety would pass quickly or he would have to leave Kevin behind which would mean leaving Nicky, and he didn’t like to have his family divided when he needed to have eyes on all of them.

“You’re being awfully quiet,” Andrew said, giving Nicky a pointed look.

Nicky sighed. “The truth is, I already knew about this, at least some of it.” Andrew glared and Nicky
shrugged. “Aaron told me. To be fair, he was pretty drunk and upset at the time so don’t hold it against him.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you knew?” Andrew asked. He couldn’t imagine Nicky keeping a secret quiet for anything.

“I was hoping you would tell me when you were ready. And you did.” Nicky offered Andrew a small smile. “I’m not going to argue with you about rescuing Rain. I think you’re doing the right thing and I know that you’ve thought through all the risks involved. You’re too meticulous not to.” Nicky placed a hand on Kevin’s back, rubbing his shoulders. “I’ll keep a watch on Day so don’t worry about that.” His expression was uncharacteristically serious as he turned back to Andrew. “You do what you have to do and I’ll be here to help keep things from falling apart.”

Andrew stared at his cousin. He often forgot that Nicky was his guardian because Nicky never liked to assert authority or try to control him and Aaron. But day in and day out Nicky was always there, ready to provide support. He had kept their family together after Tilda, he had accepted this life away from his fiancé and a lot of the time Andrew didn’t give him enough credit for that.

“Thanks,” Andrew said. He swallowed around the unexpected lump in his throat. “I need to go pack some stuff for Saturday. If Kevin doesn’t want to go will you stay here with him?”

“Of course,” Nicky answered at the same time that Kevin muttered, “I can hear you, you know.”

“Right.” Andrew stood up, his knees popping from sitting so long. “I’ll be in my room if you need me.” He gave Kevin’s shoulder a squeeze and nodded to Nicky before leaving the room.

The silence of his dorm room was devastating. Andrew closed the door and sank to the floor. The conversation had hollowed him out and the sucking feeling of helplessness was taking over. He allowed himself to be weak for a moment, to stop fighting so damn hard…

…a whirlpool of memories opened up in the silence, dragging him down. Andrew did his best to summon better memories to counteract them but the bad ones were stronger. Drake, juvie, Cass, foster homes, Tilda, seeing Nicky hurt, countless fights, watching Jason slam Rain’s head against the counter. Andrew scrambled across the floor and grabbed the trashcan just in time to hurl his partially digested breakfast and bile onto the wadded up paper inside. He tried to spit the awful taste out of his mouth, gasping and shaking, sweating.

“Ah fuck,” Andrew whispered. “Fuck fuck fuck.” He swiped his hand across his forehead before fumbling for the tissue box and wiping his mouth. Kevin’s water bottle was close by and Andrew emptied its contents into his mouth, swishing and swallowing again and again.

He tried to remember what Betsy had taught him about dealing with episodes like this. He didn’t want to take the pills that would help him calm down so he tried the breathing exercises, tried centering his thoughts. It reminded him of Rain doing yoga in the backyard at the Columbia house. He remembered the exact placement of the scars and injuries on Rain’s body, just as he remembered exactly how Rain had breathed easily through each pose, stretching and bending and moving through the pain like a meditation. He remembered the way the morning sun had glinted off Rain’s piercings, shone on the glimmer of sweat that streaked down his torso, how Rain’s curls had been damp and dark, falling over his forehead. He could replay their entire conversation and reexamine the expressions that flitted across Rain’s face, track his gestures and body language. There wasn’t a single thing about Rain that wasn’t beautiful.

A knock on the door startled Andrew out of his reverie. He stood up and went to the door, opening it a crack to see who was waiting in the hall. Aaron stood outside, fidgeting with his phone.
“Nicky said that you told him and Kevin what’s going on with Rain.” Andrew nodded but kept his expression neutral. “I didn’t mean to tell Nicky,” Aaron added, his eyes wide. “It just… happened. But uh, I wanted to see if you wanted me to go pick up some supplies for Rain. Like food and stuff. Since he’ll be staying at the house and all.”

Andrew pulled the door open wider and Aaron’s nose wrinkled as he smelled the stench of vomit. He didn’t say anything about it though he did give Andrew a very intense look.

“That would help,” Andrew replied. “I’m packing some clothes for him. Do you need any cash?”

Aaron shook his head. “Naw, I got the card from Nicky. I’m taking Katelyn with me. Don’t freak out—she doesn’t know, yet.”

“Okay.” Andrew gripped the doorframe to keep upright. “Good. And thanks.”

“Can I borrow the car then?” Aaron asked. He looked a little too eager.

“Hell no,” Andrew answered.

“Asshole,” Aaron complained but when he turned away Andrew could have sworn that he saw the edge of a smile on his brother’s face.

Andrew woke up early on Saturday morning after a night of broken, restless sleep. It was like a switch had been flipped and he was instantly, totally awake and aware of exactly what needed to happen. His senses felt heightened and he registered the smallest sounds and most subtle scents, felt the fabric of his shirt and gym shorts clinging to him like another skin. He also felt the nervous hunger burning in his stomach. It was going to be a long day and no matter how queasy he felt he knew he would need to eat well in order to stay focused. He let Kevin sleep, knowing that he would be useless for several more hours. When the time came he and Nicky could haul Kevin to the car and let him sleep in the back. At least they had last night’s win to bolster their spirits on what was most likely going to be a hellish day.

The kitchenette area was vacant and dim in the early morning light. Andrew opened the mini-fridge and pulled out eggs and bread before starting a pot of coffee. They would probably stop for McDonald’s on the way but he wanted to eat now just in case. By the time the coffee was done and the eggs were cooked Aaron stumbled out, looking bedraggled and cranky. He ignored Andrew and went straight for the OJ, drinking it from the carton and then putting it back in the fridge. Andrew rolled his eyes and shoveled scrambled eggs onto his slightly burnt toast. Aaron tried to steal some toast and Andrew smacked his hand.

“Hey,” Aaron grumbled, his voice rough from sleep, “I’m sacrificing my entire day for your boyfriend, the least you could do is feed me.”

Andrew gave Aaron a cool look. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

In response Aaron thumped his forehead on the table and muttered oww under his breath. “What is he, then?”

“Boyfriend sounds stupid,” Andrew answered. He got up and put more bread in the toaster and poured another mug of coffee. “We’re together but it’s not like we’re Facebook official.”

Aaron propped his head up, chin resting on the edge of the table. “Don’t be a shithead, Andrew. Call the poor kid your boyfriend or just admit that he’s your long lost soulmate. I don’t care. But I’m sick
of you being all mysterious.”

“Someone woke up hostile,” Andrew replied. He added two spoonfuls of sugar to his coffee, thought about it for a moment, and added a third spoonful and then a liberal dose of snicker doodle creamer. *Perfection.* “Fine. If you want to call him my boyfriend you do that. But I want you to understand that Rain is more than that. He’s…” Andrew clutched his coffee mug and squinted, like the words would magically appear in the floating dust motes. “He’s like us, all of us. He needs saving, needs a second chance. We’re doing that, the only way I know how.”

The toast popped up and Andrew spread butter and jam on it and then passed it to Aaron. They sat for a while in silence, Andrew slowly drinking his coffee and Aaron demolishing the toast. When Aaron finished he put the plate in the sink and got more orange juice. Andrew checked the time on the microwave. They would need to leave soon; his pulse was already racing, urging him to go.

“You know,” Aaron said, pausing in the open doorway that led to the hall, “I was wrong about you.” Andrew cocked his head inquisitively. “You act like you don’t give a fuck 99% of the time so I thought you really didn’t.” Aaron picked at the wall, not looking at Andrew. “I forget what you did to get us here.”

Andrew shifted, uncomfortable with Aaron’s confession and wondered if he and his twin would ever be comfortable together, if they would always be dogged by this prickling tension created by years of separation and trauma and misunderstandings.

“What do you want me to say?” Andrew asked.

“Fuck, I don’t know,” Aaron admitted. “I guess… I want you to know that I know you’re trying. And whatever happens today I’ll do my best to help you. Not because I owe you, but because I’m your brother.”

Before Andrew could even process that statement Nicky stumbled into the room and grabbed Aaron in a bear hug, tears sliding down his face.

“Aaron Michael Minyard, you beautiful boy, I love you!” Nicky sobbed. “Andrew, get in here! Family hug! Family hug!” Aaron was doing his best to fight his way out of Nicky’s hug and Andrew made sure to keep the table between him and Nicky. “I’m so proud!” Nicky continued. “I can’t wait to tell Erik!”

“Nicky, get off me!” Aaron yelped. “Andrew! Help!”

“Oh no,” Andrew said, making a break for the door, “you have to fight this battle on your own.” He managed to duck around them and make it to the safety of his room where another challenge awaited him.

Getting Kevin out of bed, dressed, and into the car was a Herculean feat that Andrew felt was definitely more trouble than it was worth, especially when Kevin cussed him out the entire time. Once they were in the car Kevin immediately passed out, which was why Andrew had insisted Kevin ride shotgun; that way no one would be able to talk to him while he drove. The supplies had been packed the night before so getting on the road didn’t take long. Traffic was fairly light at that hour which meant they would make good time.

Andrew kept the radio playing, scanning stations as they traveled north, trying to get the music to distract him. But every song reminded him of Rain somehow, even the angry songs. Well, those reminded him of Jason and how much he hated that fucking guy which of course made him think of Rain. Nicky tried to get him to stop on the pop music stations but Andrew kept right on going,
settling on alternative rock or classic rock. Aaron read his textbook and wore earplugs to block out the noise.

By the time the Appalachian Mountains came into view Kevin was awake and hungry so they pulled off to get McDonald’s breakfast. Andrew smoked in the parking lot while the others went inside. He checked his phone, his fingers itching to send Rain a message. They were so close.

“I hate you,” Kevin muttered once they were all back in the car and on their way.

“How can a man with a hashbrown in his hand be so full of hate?” Andrew mused.

“You woke me up to drag me to North Fucking Carolina to listen to fucking bluegrass and put my life in peril for a hippie boy. I hate you.” Kevin went to bite the hashbrown but Andrew swiped it from him. He took a huge bite before Kevin could even react.

“Eat first,” Andrew mumbled around his mouthful of potato goodness, “complain later.”

“You’re my least favorite Minyard,” Kevin sulked.

“Baby, that’s not what you said on the court,” Andrew purred. Aaron made a retching noise and Nicky laughed.

Picking on Kevin helped pass the time and ease the tension as they left I-26 and started navigating the back roads. Neighborhoods faded to stretches of trees and occasional fields.

“I feel like rednecks are going to sabotage the road and kill us,” Nicky whispered, peering out the window with a haunted expression.

“Jesus Christ, Nicky,” Aaron commented, “you’re from South Carolina!”

“Excuse me, I’m from suburbia not the backwoods.”

Andrew tapped the brakes as they came up behind a Volkswagen bus that was chugging along at about ten miles below the speed limit. The bus was painted a weird green color and the back of it was almost completely covered in bumper stickers. The license plate spelled out HOBBIT.

“Looks like we’re going the right way,” Andrew observed, slowing down and following the bus. He rolled down the windows, feeling the cool mountain air rush in, smelling crisp and fresh like crushed pine needles. It was nearly 10am and the day’s drama was only just beginning.

Chapter End Notes

Raise your hand if you had no idea this fic would be so long and dramatic! *raises hand* If you’re still reading this THANK YOU. I promise you won’t have to wait an entire month for the next update. Also I’m sorry Rain wasn’t in this update but we’ll see a lot of him next time. This time around I was interested in exploring how Andrew relates to Aaron, Nicky, and Kevin in this AU where the Moriyama drama is mostly settled and they’re all a bit more willing to communicate.

Also, in case people are worried about historical accuracy, Google Maps came out in 2005, Facebook in 2004. I’m pretending that the guys have kitchen stuff to cook eggs. They could have a hot plate, right? Maybe? *laughs* Thanks again for reading!
Comments/feedback are extremely appreciated!
Chapter Notes

FYI: This fic has graduated from Teen to Mature. That being said this update contains NSFW sexy times. I don't consider them to be explicit but I may not be the best judge of that.

Andrew followed the old VW bus off the road and down a bumpy dirt track. Dust hung in the air, drifted through the open windows before Andrew got sick of it and rolled the windows up again. Whenever they managed to make it back from this excursion he was going to make Rain wash the fucking car.

The VW pulled over into a small field that was already half-full of cars. Most of them were old vans and bugs, trucks, a few campers, and some rickety compact models. The Maserati stood out like a sore thumb. Andrew and his lot stood out even more.

Andrew had not anticipated the culture clash. He was wearing his usual all black ensemble and Aaron was dressed almost identically. Kevin wore a Trojans shirt and comfortable jeans. Only Nicky looked like he might fit in with his ragged jeans embroidered with flowers and his FREE HUGS shirt. He was even wearing Birkenstocks. He claimed they belonged to Erik but Andrew wasn’t fooled; Erik’s shoes definitely would not fit Nicky.

“You don’t have some tie-dye shirts stashed in the trunk, do you?” Aaron asked as Andrew dug in the back for his backpack of supplies.

“No.” Andrew slammed the trunk, startling Aaron.

“Fuck,” Aaron hissed. “This is bad, Andrew. Jason’ll see us coming from a mile away and if we want to sneak Rain out…” He scanned the field, his eyes flicking over the cars and the people heading towards the sound of music. “I don’t think this crowd is going to be big enough.”

“We’ll just have to see,” Andrew said. It was too soon to scrap the plan. At the very least they could check in with Rain. It might be possible that he would know of a way to get out unseen. They were near the woods, after all.

Andrew slung the pack over his shoulders. “C’mon,” he said, trudging off to follow the hippies.

Kevin stuck to Andrew’s side. His hands were shoved in his pockets and he was frowning, practically glowering. Andrew had made him put a Band-Aid over his tattoo but now he was worried that it wouldn’t be enough. He shouldn’t have brought Kevin, a minor sports celebrity. He considered making Aaron and Kevin wait in the car but that would be suspicious.

Where were all the people? He had walked in here expecting a small scale Bonnaroo but this was like… like a concert on the beach: word of mouth, friends only, with someone there to provide drinks and food and music. Shit.

They left the parking area and followed the dirt road to another field that was bordered by trees. A creek ran through the woods and around the field; they crossed it on an unsteady wooden bridge. A
stage of sorts was set up at one end of the field and the area in front of it was covered by people standing around, dancing, drinking. Booths and porta potties bordered one side of the field. It was a casual setup: a wet bar serving, primarily, beer from kegs; a couple food tables; some band merch booths; and, at the end of the row, was the Pipe Dream booth and Rain standing behind the table. Andrew sucked in a sharp breath and scanned the crowd for Jason but didn’t see him. There were a couple hundred people milling about, plus there were makeshift tents pitched all around the field; it was possible that Jason was in one of them.

“This is not going to work,” Aaron said. He was standing to Andrew’s left and biting at his thumb. Nicky stood by Aaron, bobbing his head to the music.

“You guys need to chill out,” Nicky muttered. “We’re attracting attention. Act like you’re enjoying the music.” Aaron tried swaying in place and Kevin put on his sunglasses and took his hands out of his pockets.

“If you expect me to relax you need to buy me drinks, right the fuck now,” Kevin snapped.

Andrew was so frustrated he could scream. This was not the setting he was hoping for. Nothing about this was right.

“Fine,” he said. “You guys get some drinks, see if you can blend in or something but stay close to each other. I’ll talk to Rain and figure out where Jason is. And for the love of… fuck, I don’t know… just don’t get wasted or high. I need all of us to keep our wits about us.”

“Yes, sir,” Nicky said, solemnly saluting Andrew.

“Nicky, I mean it,” Andrew said. “You know what’s at stake.”

“We’ll keep it together,” Aaron reassured him. “Call me if you need something.”

Andrew watched the three of them get in line at the beer table. Nicky started chatting to the people in front of them, grinning and joking enough to make up for Kevin being freaked and Aaron being surly. They would be fine.

He made his way towards Rain, weaving around groups of people dancing and smoking. Rain noticed him right away and smiled hugely, his posture perking up. Rain glanced around casually and gave Andrew a shallow nod, indicating that the coast was clear. Andrew rolled his eyes and approached the booth. He pretended to view the merchandise but that only lasted a moment. He couldn’t take his eyes off Rain.

Rain was like a fucking hallucination, except Andrew doubted that he would ever have a pipe dream as good as this. Rain was wearing a crop top that stopped right above his belly button, revealing his perfectly toned stomach and the glittering piercing in his navel. The top was loose, floating in the breeze and falling off one shoulder. It was a galaxy print, speckled with glittering stars. Rain’s purple curls perfectly complemented the shirt. And if that wasn’t distracting enough Rain was wearing cutoff jean shorts that hugged his ass and thighs. Andrew only spared Rain’s amazing legs a brief look; he was too turned on to risk a more intense examination.

“Like what you see?” Rain asked archly. He leaned across the table, the shirt falling forward and revealing his collarbones and chest.

Andrew couldn’t manage a response so he tried to look as unimpressed as possible. He focused on Rain’s face, the curve of his lips, the sheen of glitter on his cheekbones and eyelids, the freckles on his cheeks. That didn’t help at all.
“Got any cigarettes?” he asked.

“As a matter of fact…” Rain turned and bent over a crate, digging around and looking for something. Andrew couldn’t help but stare.

“What the fuck is around your ankle?” he asked. There was something bulky sticking out of Rain’s boot.

Rain straightened up and passed Andrew a pack of cigarettes and kicked his foot against the ground, a pained look on his face. “Insurance,” he said. “Jason can’t keep an eye on me all the time so he put a tracker on me.”

“What the fuck.” Andrew came around the table and squatted down, one hand on Rain’s leg as he examined the monitor. “Fuck.”

“It was a good plan, Drew,” Rain said softly, his fingers brushing through Andrew’s hair. “We couldn’t have anticipated this.”

Andrew gripped Rain behind the knee and leaned his head against Rain’s hip. He wasn’t ready to concede defeat but the situation was fucking impossible.

“Where did he even get this?” he asked Rain, not really expecting an answer.

“I don’t know. Can’t you just buy them online?”

“Huh.” Andrew tapped his fingers against Rain’s knee. “That’s disturbing.”

“Yeah.”

Rain continued petting his hair while Andrew tried to get it together. It felt worse than being trapped with Drake. Because then it was happening to him and he could get out. He had gotten out. He did that. But Rain? Jesus, he was fucked no matter what they tried.

“Andrew?” Rain’s fingers traced the shell of his ear, down to his neck and Andrew shivered.

“Uh-huh?”

“Will you dance with me?” There was a barely restrained ache in Rain’s voice that tugged at Andrew so hard there was no way he could tell him ‘no.’

“Right here?” Andrew asked, looking up. Rain was looking down, curls hanging in his face, his blue eyes—wait. The devilish black contacts—Andrew had always known they were contacts—were gone and Rain was blinking at him with blue eyes as dark and deep as the sea. Andrew swallowed, feeling parched and undone. *Shit.* And he really had thought Rain couldn’t get more attractive.

“No, silly,” Rain grinned. “When I go on break. We can sneak off, not too far. I just…” Rain gazed out at the people congregated in front of the stage. “I want to have at least one dance with you.”

“Don’t say shit like that,” Andrew growled, getting to his feet and crowding close to Rain. “You’ll get plenty of dances, all the dancing you want, soon as we get you free.”

“Right.” Rain’s smile said he didn’t believe that would ever happen and Andrew wanted to grab him around his stupidly slender waist, hoist him over his shoulder, and make a run for it. “Well, in the meantime…just one dance? I know this isn’t your scene.”

Andrew laughed mirthlessly. “You’re right about that.” The band on stage was playing a song that
was familiar, one that Andrew had heard in a foster home, “Mary Jane’s Last Dance.” He had recognized the song before that, too, “House of the Rising Sun.” It was unsettling, tripping memories that were never completely buried.

“When Jason comes out to work the table we can meet up, to the left of the stage. I’ll make a request and we can go to the tent,” Rain’s cheeks flushed and Andrew could swear that his pupils dilated, “and, uh, dance.”

Andrew raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like you mean something else, Rainbow.”

Rain shrugged, the damn shirt sliding farther down his arm, and winked. “We’ll see. But for now I need you to get lost. You’re scaring off the customers.”

Andrew looked over his shoulder and saw that there was a huddle of people waiting to the side, pretending to look at one of the band’s merch, but the hungry look in their eyes revealed that their true interest lay with the smoke shop booth. Andrew smiled his most disconcerting smile at them and Rain sighed. Andrew wanted to kiss that sigh out of Rain’s mouth but he contented himself with giving Rain a look full of trouble and promises. Rain pretended to swoon, the shirt pulling up over his ribs as he tipped back. Andrew walked away while he still could.

Nicky had maneuvered Kevin and Aaron to the grass to the right of the stage. They were sharing a picnic blanket with a group of college girls. Nicky was entertaining them with stories of raucous nights at Eden’s – though he had thoughtfully changed the name of the club – and was generally embarrassing the hell out of Kevin and Aaron.

“I never threw up on your shoes!” Kevin yelled. He was nursing a red Solo cup of beer and looking angry about it. Kevin never drank beer unless he had no choice. ‘All carbs, barely any alcohol. Takes half the night to get tipsy.’

“Oh buddy, it’s sad that you still keep telling yourself that,” Nicky said, patting Kevin’s knee. “Aaron got so drunk one night that he looked in a mirror, thought it was Andrew – his twin – and started cussing himself out!” The girls were giggling, their eyes flicking between the two brothers. “I have a video…”

“Nicky, play nice,” Andrew interrupted before Nicky could get around to the video. The girls didn’t need to see the inside of their house. “Did he tell you about how he tried to take a raccoon home because he thought it was a stray cat?”

The girls burst out laughing, clutching at each other. They started talking at once, telling stories about how Jennifer had gotten plastered and wandered into a pet store and cried all over the puppies.

While Nicky kept the girls distracted and Kevin grumbled into his beer, Andrew drew Aaron away. They walked towards the beer line, ignoring the drunks who yelled stupid shit like ‘Hey! Are y’all twins?!’

“What happened to the plan?” Aaron asked, keeping his voice quiet. “Where’s Rain?”

“Rain,” Andrew said, heaving a huge sigh, “is tethered.” Aaron looked confused so Andrew clarified. “He’s got a fucking ankle monitor strapped to him.”

“Shit.” Aaron grimaced and looked towards the Pipe Dream booth where Rain was helping a couple guys pick out pipe. “What the fuck is he wearing?”

Andrew shrugged. “He told me once that Jason picks his clothes.”
Aaron wisely chose not to make further commentary on Rain’s wardrobe. And there was no way that Andrew would admit that he thought Rain looked like a fucking wet dream.

“Are we leaving, then? I’m not sure how much of this I can take.”

“Could be worse.” The band had picked another sad song, “A Day in the Life” by the Beatles. “I told Rain I would stay. He wants a dance.”

Aaron rolled his eyes so hard Andrew thought they might get stuck like that, ghostly whites showing forever.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Andrew said, cuffing the back of his head. “They got anything besides beer?”

“Ouch,” Aaron complained, rubbing the back of his head. “The also have hard lemonade or hard sweet tea.”

“That’ll do. Want anything?”

“Yeah, to get the fuck out of here,” Aaron grumbled.

Andrew wanted to tell his brother to fuck off but he knew that would be a bad idea. Aaron was an addict and even though the drugs being passed around weren’t the really shitty kind – Andrew had only seen pot, acid, and mushrooms – it was still enough to trigger Aaron’s old urges. Andrew got them lemonades and pulled Aaron out of the crowd. They stood in the shade of a huge oak tree and Andrew smoked the cigarettes that Rain had slipped him. Aaron sat on the grass and texted Katelyn updates, his hands unsteady as he thumbed at the number pad.

Time passed in a slow crawl. Andrew felt stretched, his heart pulling towards Rain while his mind raged at their foiled plan. Nicky and Kevin were still with the college girls; they were all lying down, laughing, even Kevin.

Then the song changed and Andrew grabbed Aaron’s shoulder, squeezing tight.

“This song goes out to a very special fella in the audience,” the singer said, her twangy voice heavy with meaning, “and to all you love birds in the crowd.” There was a lot of hollering and cheering and Andrew was moving, dragging Aaron towards Nicky. “Sometimes you can’t fight love, y’all. And sometimes, you have to go your own way.”

The band struck the opening chords at the same time that Andrew deposited Aaron with Nicky and Kevin. He gave them all a stern look and told them to “stay” and then he was gone, looking for Rain.

In a crowd of tall people finding someone who was only a little taller than him was difficult. But to the left of the stage, as promised, stood Rain, surrounded by a circle of admirers. He smiled and laughed, blushed, but all the while he was looking. Andrew pushed through the circle and took Rain’s warm hand in his, squeezing when the strangers hooted and whistled. Rain was in his arms in a second, breathing into his ear, “Let’s get out of here.”

They moved through the thick of the crowd, trying to stay out of view of the smoke shop booth. Rain snagged an abandoned blanket and draped it around them. It was a decent disguise but too hot under the early autumn sun. Rain clung to him and Andrew allowed it. It felt a bit like they were in Harry Potter, sneaking around under an invisibility cloak. What Andrew wouldn’t give for a real invisibility cloak or magic or killing spells…

The song lyrics rang out, the crowd singing along: *If I could/Maybe I’d give you my world/How can I/When you won’t take it from me.* Rain hummed along.
The tent was on the edge of the field, in the shade of the trees. Rain pulled him inside. It was a proper carnival tent: pitched and spacious, the billowing fabric walls a vibrant tie-dye. The floor of the tent was covered in blankets and pillows. Rain kicked some pillows out of the way, wrapped his arms around Andrew’s neck, and kissed him.

Andrew didn’t complain about Rain not asking first, and he didn’t bother to ask before gripping Rain’s bare waist, sliding his hands all over his skin. Rain swayed in place – Andrew supposed he was dancing – his eyes closed.

If I could/Baby I’d give you my world/Open up/Everything’s waiting for you

“Andrew.” Rain pulled back, fingers digging into Andrew’s shirt. “I want—” Rain swallowed, blushing. “I said I wanted to dance but I really just want you.” His fingers tightened, his whole body seemed to tense. “Like… I want to have sex with you.”

Andrew only managed to keep his composure through some minor miracle. “Really.” He took a step back and assessed Rain. “You’re not freaking out on me, are you?”

Rain shook his head. “I’ve wanted this for a while now but,” he held out his hands, “we never really have time, do we?” There was a slight tremor in his voice. Rain moved closer, pressing up against Andrew, hands tangling in his hair again. “I’ve never. And… I want it to be you. I’m scared—”

“Hey.” Andrew cupped Rain’s face, tilting it until their eyes met. “Hey. Why are you scared?”

“I’m scared that I’m going to die or—” Rain looked close to tears. “Did you notice? My bruises have faded. It’s been almost a month, Andrew.” It took Andrew a moment to connect the two statements but when he did it felt like a knife to his heart. “Yeah,” Rain whispered. “He’ll be back soon. It wasn’t terrible last time, I’ve been through worse but I’m worried, Drew.” His voice caught. “About escalation…”

Andrew pulled Rain down onto the pillows, holding him close.

“You think he might rape you?” He couldn’t believe this was happening. That he was able to say the works when they burned like battery acid on his tongue.

Rain clutched at the front of his shirt. “It’s a legitimate concern. God knows Jason won’t do anything if he did.” Rain swallowed again and looked up, past Andrew to the tent ceiling. “I don’t know. It feels like time is running out.”

“That’s bullshit,” Andrew said. He grabbed the back of Rain’s neck and squeezed. “I’m going to save you.”

“I know.” Rain smiled a little and kissed Andrew’s cheek. “Forget it I’m being paranoid and depressing. The ankle monitor took me by surprise and I’m just… feeling more stuck than usual.” He was doing his best to downplay his anxiety but Andrew wasn’t fooled.

“Rain.”

“Yeah?”

“Would it really make you feel better? Sleeping with me?”

Rain shrugged. “Honestly? I know it’s only a temporary escape but I really, really want to be with you. I don’t want to be manipulative; I wish I could take back all that shit about being worried because, Andrew, this moment should be about just you and me. Not anything else.”
“Just you and me,” Andrew echoed. He pulled Rain onto his lap and stroked his back, pushing his hand under the ridiculous crop top. Rain’s back was tense and Andrew kneaded at his muscles. There wasn’t an ounce of fat on his body. He was a marvel, a beautiful, endangered species. “How about,” Andrew murmured, “I get you off? Make you cum. Would that be enough?”

Rain nodded, relaxing bit by bit as Andrew touched him.

“I would like to have sex with you, someday,” Andrew continued, speaking into Rain’s ear, smelling the incense smoke that lingered in his hair. “But I’m not ready. I… there’s a lot you don’t know about me, Rain. I can’t give you this, not right now. Is that okay?”

“Of course.” Rain’s eyes were heavy lidded. It was that drowsy, fogged look he got when they kissed. It was incredibly sexy. “What do you want me to do?”

“Take your shirt off,” Andrew said. “We don’t want it to get messy.”

Rain’s cheeks went pink but he complied, slipping the shirt off easily and setting it to the side. “Now?”

“I want you to sit between my legs with your back to my chest.”

“Okay.” Rain scrambled around. “Should I take my shorts off?”

Andrew loved the sight of Rain in those shorts. And without his shirt? Fucking priceless.

“If that’s what you want,” Andrew replied. He watched, breathless, as Rain tugged off the shorts and the pair of minuscule briefs underneath. Rain made a move to sit but Andrew stopped him, his hand braced against Rain’s hip. “I’ve changed my mind.”

“Oh.” Rain looked disappointed. “Want me to put my clothes back on?”

“What?” Andrew blinked, his brain still blitzed by seeing Rain naked. “No. No, I mean, there’s something else I want to do to you, if it’s okay.”

Rain stood there so casually, like being in his birthday suit in front of the guy he liked wasn’t a big deal. *Fucking hippie.* He even had his hands on his hips, the bastard.

“What do you want to do?”

“Blow you.” Andrew said the words with perfect calm. He didn’t even blush. But Rain certainly did.

“Oh.” Rain tugged at his hair and held his throat with his other hand. Now that was an image Andrew was hanging onto. “Yeah. Okay. Yes. I want that.” Rain was flushing all over, his nipples tightening while Andrew watched.

“Good.” Andrew rose up onto his knees and got both hands on Rain’s hips, rubbing gently before reaching for Rain’s cock. Rain startled a little at the touch and Andrew could feel his pulse surging against his hand. “So hot, Rain,” Andrew said, teasing with his fingers and palm, working Rain up.

Rain swallowed hard, his mouth open as he watched. Andrew looked back, feeling turned on just by the eye fucking and touching Rain.

“Can I…” Rain stuttered, “can I touch you?”

“Now he remembers to ask,” Andrew muttered. “Sure, go nuts.”
Rain made a low noise when Andrew took a first lick, his fingers tightening in Andrew’s hair.

“Don’t yank,” Andrew warned, but Rain soon forgot. Andrew could deal with the sore scalp and pricking headache later, right now he gave over to pleasuring Rain and pushing him over the edge, once with mouth, and then again, later, with his hands. Rain came undone for him, moaning prettily and practically crying out praises.

It would have been easy to completely lose himself in Rain and, for a few moments, he did. When Rain was deep in his throat, when he sucked kisses over that silly navel piercing, or when Rain let him grind against his bare ass while jerking him off. Being with Rain was an intoxicating release, for both of them, but in the back of his mind Andrew kept track of the minutes by paying attention to the song changes. He couldn’t keep Rain in this tent forever, he couldn’t spirit him away to Columbia like he had planned.

Rain looked absolutely wrecked when Andrew finally pulled away. He looked so amazing that it was a true test of Andrew’s willpower that he didn’t instantly start peppering Rain with kisses from his face to his ankle where that hateful, hateful monitor was shackled to him. Instead he helped Rain clean up and helped him dress, found a bottle of water which they both shared. Rain sat beside him, drinking slowly, his eyes dazed.

“Was that good?” Andrew asked. He was pretty sure he knew the answer. Rain had said it over and over, during. But confirmation after the fact was nice, too.

“It was so good,” Rain said fervently. “I never want you to leave. I want you to make me feel like that again.”

Andrew dabbed at the spots on his shirt. “Good,” he murmured, “because I think our time is up.” He helped Rain to his feet and they stood at the tent entrance, pulling the flap back to take in the festival.

“I should go first,” Rain said. “Then you. Take the blanket and meet up with your friends.”

“Okay.” Andrew took Rain’s hand again and squeezed. “I’m not giving up,” he reminded him.

“I know.” Rain leaned in and kissed him, slowly like he was trying to memorize and savor Andrew’s taste. “Thank you,” he said, staring deep into Andrew’s eyes, “you were amazing.”

Chapter End Notes

Songs mentioned: House of the Rising Sun by The Animals; Mary Jane's Last Dance by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers; A Day in the Life by The Beatles; and song lyrics from Go Your Own Way by Fleetwood Mac

FYI: the bit about Aaron getting drunk and yelling at his reflection is based on this hilarious headcanon
“I fucked up,” Andrew said, dodging a kick to his abs and lunging forward. His strike was blocked by Renee’s forearm and she followed up with a knee to his side. Andrew grunted and retreated. He panted a quick breath, circling and looking for an opening. “I couldn’t get him out of there.”

Renee nodded, her expression sober. She didn’t drop her guard so Andrew tried a diversion, hoping to throw her off and get in a hit. But Renee was too good. No matter how many times they sparred she always won. Andrew’s fighting style, Renee had explained, relied on brute force and recklessness; he fought all out with nothing to lose. Renee fought smarter, going for exact strikes, hitting where it would hurt the most. Renee admitted she was better at one on one fights but that Andrew excelled at fighting multiple attackers. Which was why now, as always, she was kicking his ass.

“What’s your next move?” Renee asked. She moved in with a flurry of quick, precise hits, the first one landing but Andrew managed to deflect the rest.

“I was thinking of killing Jason and giving Rain the rest of the funds from my mom to go on the run. But that’s going to take more planning.” Renee gestured for a time out so Andrew could continue his talk uninterrupted. “He’ll need a new ID, new look, a safe house or something. He’ll know all that stuff better than me.”

“You think it will be that easy?” Renee asked. She squeezed some water into her mouth and tossed the bottle to Andrew. He caught it in one hand and squirted the lukewarm water down his throat.

“No but we’re out of options. I think he’s tired, too tired to care what happens to him.”

“Or he’s grown complacent now that he has you,” Renee suggested. Andrew scowled. He didn’t want to admit that it was a possibility, that he was holding Rain back. “Have you asked him about what he would have done if he hadn’t met you?”

Andrew glared at the floor, flexing his hands into fists. His knuckles stung and would be bruised in a couple hours; he hadn’t bothered to wrap his hands like Renee told him to.

“We haven’t talked about that. I – you might be right.”

“True love.” Renee’s voice was sarcastic, bordering on bitter. It was a surprise, her good girl mask slipping. “Sorry, Andrew,” she said, frowning, “that was uncalled for. I know this is new for you, too.”

“Oh, shut up,” Andrew muttered. “I don’t need your fucking pity.”

Renee leaned over and lightly smacked his knee. “It’s not pity, you heathen. It’s support.”

Andrew got to his feet, stifling a groan. “When I need your support I’ll call you. We’ll be burying a body or burning it or some shit.”

“Just like the bad old days,” Renee sighed. She stretched, fingers sliding over her toes. “You done?”

“Yeah, I’m done. See you at practice.”
When Andrew looked back Renee’s forehead was resting on her arms and he could have sworn she was praying. Andrew frowned and headed back to the dorms. It was Monday and he had homework to do and a murder to plan.

—–

Despite Rain’s feelings of foreboding there were no negative repercussions following the musical festival. Andrew was getting daily updates whenever Rain had a chance to get away. Sometimes the calls came when Andrew was in a lecture and he would quietly gather his stuff and exit the classroom, his heart kicking in his chest when he heard Rain’s voice on the other end. If he could have brought his phone onto the court he would have. Kevin had noticed Andrew’s new obsession with his phone and had some very pointed things to say, most of which Andrew ignored.

Yet, even with regular updates, Andrew felt uneasy. He needed to see Rain. He told himself that having sex with Rain hadn’t changed anything. He told himself that his dreams about Rain meant nothing; that his vivid recall of what happened in the tent meant nothing. He hadn’t told Bee about it so clearly it wasn’t that important.

It was Wednesday when he got the call. He had just returned to the dorms after studying in the library with Kevin and Nicky. They had followed him back and were snacking in the living area while Andrew retreated to the privacy of his room.

“I want to see you,” Rain said, his voice hushed. Rain knew Andrew wasn’t a fan of small talk so he got straight to the point. It was sort of cute.

Andrew shut the door to his room and leaned against it, flipping the lock in place.

“When?” Andrew asked.

“I won’t be at Eden’s this weekend. I have my, ah, appointment Friday night.”

Andrew scratched at the door, wanting to sink his nails in, to destroy something. He had wanted to get Rain out of there before this happened again. The failure was eating him alive.

“Right.” Andrew bit out the word, burying the anger behind a façade of terseness. Rain wasn’t fooled.

The silence stretched between them. There weren’t any words of comfort that Andrew could give Rain that would be true and Rain, apparently, couldn’t think of anything to say, either.

Finally Rain sighed and continued. “Are you free in a hour? Jason’s going to be gone, probably for the afternoon.”

“I’ll be there.” Andrew would be skipping his Spanish class but he could get notes from Aaron.

“Thank you, Andrew.” The words were tinged with the same longing that Rain had used when he had said goodbye to Andrew at the musical festival. Thinking about what happened leading up to that goodbye had Andrew unzipping his jeans and slumping against the door.

Rain whispered his goodbyes and hung up. Andrew tossed the phone onto his bed. He shut his eyes and let the memory replay, getting off to the vision of Rain naked and pressed against him, his blue eyes watering and that damn pretty mouth calling his name. It felt like cheating and it did nothing to satisfy the ache in his chest.

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Nicky whined when Andrew told him that he was heading over to Pipe Dream.

“I want to see Rain,” Nicky said. “And I want to see if they finally got that new Exy porno that Kevin keeps talking about.”

“I WAS NOT!” Kevin yelled from his seat in front of the TV.

“Oh, right, it was hentai you kept talking about. Sorry.”

“NICKY.”

“This is why you can’t come,” Andrew said, pocketing his keys and wallet. “Don’t worry, I’ll bring you some souvenirs.”

“Best cousin!” Nicky grinned before his expression shifted to something more subdued. “Tell Rain I’m praying for him, okay? Like every day. And bring him those Thin Mints you’ve been hoarding in the freezer. That boy needs to eat more.”

Andrew kept his commentary to himself and assured Nicky that he would. His cousin had been through too much trying to hold on to his faith; he didn’t need to hear Andrew hating on it. He grabbed the coveted Thin Mints and left.

When Andrew pulled up in front of Pipe Dream he was unsurprised to see that it was empty as usual. Clearly the behind the scenes business was what was keeping this business afloat. Andrew wondered which had come first: the business or the drug trade. Had Jason started out as an entrepreneur who had failed and become a dealer? Or was he a dealer who needed a front? He slammed the car door and shook his head. It was immaterial.

Rain was perched on the stool behind the counter, flipping through pages in a binder. His head popped up when he heard the door chime and his smile was so damn bright it hurt to look at.

“Andrew!” Rain hopped off the stool and came around the counter. He was wearing cutoff jean overalls over a tie-dye Grateful Dead shirt that had a line of rainbow dancing bears. He wore scuffed up Converse and he looked… way too chipper for a kid living in captivity. “I’m so glad you’re here! Can I hug you?”

Andrew peered at Rain’s eyes. They were a little bloodshot and dazed.

“Are you high?” Andrew asked, disappointment sinking in his chest.

“Just a little,” Rain nodded. “Jason wanted me to try a new strain that he’s going to start selling. He gave me some before he left. It’s not bad.”

“Fuck,” Andrew grumbled. “Here,” he passed the cookies to Rain, “you’re probably hungry, right?”

“Andrew!” Rain was looking at him with tears in his eyes. “Thin Mints are my favorite!” He tore open the package and shoved a cookie in his mouth, chewing loudly. “Oh my god… so good.” He rolled his eyes happily, body shivering.

“You’re ridiculous when you’re high,” Andrew commented, taking a cookie. There was no way he was letting Rain eat all of them.

“This strain is called Happy Days.” Rain nodded in time with the music, something slow and slinky and sexy. Before Andrew knew it Rain was dancing, a Thin Mint pinched between his fingers. He noticed Andrew watching and he grinned, doing this sinuous move with his hips.
“Seems to be working,” Andrew observed. Rain laughed and spun in a slow circle.

“We never did dance at the festival,” Rain reminded him. He moved in closer until he was almost touching Andrew. “We got too busy.” His smile was pure trouble and when he bit his bottom lip… fuck. “Dance with me, Andrew.”

Rain took Andrew’s hands and placed them on his waist. Andrew dug his fingers into the denim, leaning in to smell Rain’s hair. The distinct smell of pot lingered in his curls. Rain moved against him, hands pushing up Andrew’s arms to his shoulders.

“If you close your eyes,” Rain whispered in his ear, “you can pretend we’re at Eden’s.”

Andrew didn’t close his eyes. He watched as Rain’s eyes slid closed and he tipped his head back, curls tossed. Andrew could see the tattoo behind his ear and remembered the story of how Rain’s mother was murdered. It wasn’t fair. This wasn’t fair.

Rain pulled him closer until their chests were pressed together. Andrew didn’t move his hands, didn’t move his body even though it was killing him a little to resist; it would kill him more if he acted.

“Kiss me,” Rain breathed against his lips.

Andrew shook his head, turning away. “No.”

“Why? You don’t like me anymore?” There was real pain in Rain’s voice.

“Of course I like you, Rain Storm.” Andrew almost smiled when he said Rain’s full name. So fucking fake. He pressed a finger against Rain’s lips, which was a mistake. Rain opened his mouth and bit at his fingertip, sucked at it.

“Good,” Rain said. “Because I like you a lot, Andrew Minyard. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.”

Andrew pushed another Thin Mint into Rain’s mouth.

“You know I’m not going to mess with you while you’re messed up, right?”

“Is jus pot,” Rain mumbled around the cookie.

“You’re acting like a fucking Care Bear,” Andrew said, “it’s freaking me out.”

“You’re fucking adorable,” Rain pouted. He was still holding onto Andrew, swaying to the music.

Andrew wanted to tell him about his next plan – to kill Jason – but he didn’t think Rain would react well while he was in this condition. Instead he let Rain lead him behind the counter, let Rain touch him and talk and talk and talk. He could do this, at least, listen to Rain and be there. Leaving Rain in this condition would make him worry, especially when Rain was saying things like: “Let me blow you, Andrew. I’ll be quick. And no one will see ‘cause we’re behind the counter. I’ve never done it but you can tell me what to do. I bet I’d be good. You were so good when you did that for me. Did I tell you? I felt like, like… like I had ascended to a new level of perception. Okay? It was awesome. And I like when you touch me. You can touch me. Oh, shit, I forgot I was wearing overalls. Andrew… say something.” It went on and on. Andrew was starting to wonder if the strain wasn’t really called Horny Days. He finally interrupted Rain and distracted him by mentioning the upcoming Exy game against Edgar Allan.

Rain was surprisingly reticent. And then he said, “That was Kevin’s old team.”
“That’s right,” Andrew said, studying Rain’s expression. He almost thought Rain looked scared; he was eerily transparent when he was high. “How did you know that?”

“Hmm?” Rain asked, faking ignorance. “Oh, I think he said one time.”

Andrew doubted that. Kevin didn’t talk about the Ravens unless he had to, he certainly wouldn’t drop that knowledge in a casual conversation with Rain.

“You…” Rain asked. “Are they… are they coming here?” Rain asked. His voice was strained.

“Yeah.” Andrew, for all that he hated playing Exy, was looking forward to running Riko’s team into the ground. That evil little motherfucker had some payback coming his way.

“Oh.” Rain chewed on his lip and stared over Andrew’s shoulder. “I guess… oh.” His face lit up like he was having a revelation, and not a pleasant one.

“What is it?”

“I’m so stupid,” Rain hissed. “So stupid.”

“Rain, talk to me.” Andrew squeezed his neck, cupped his face as Rain collapsed against him.

Andrew was so alarmed by Rain’s rapid change of behavior that he didn’t hear the door open but he did hear the heavy tread of boots. He looked up in time to see the ugly expression on Jason’s face before the large man hid it behind a good-natured smile.

“Hey, little lovebirds,” Jason boomed, making Rain jolt like he had been electrocuted. His fingers tightened their grip on Andrew’s shirt before pushing him back.

“Jason!” Rain croaked. “It’s uh… not what it looks like.”

“Oh?” Jason’s dark eyes took in the scene and Andrew wanted to throw up. There was a reptilian coldness to Jason that his Phish T-shirt and faded jeans couldn’t disguise. “Looks to me like you were feeling up this fella.” His gaze focused on Andrew. “What are you, a goth Girl Scout?”

“Nailed it,” Andrew deadpanned. If this fucker made a move to touch Rain he was dead.

“Hmm. Your lot giving gropes with cookies? Kinda risqué.”

Rain let go of Andrew, his hands trembling, but Andrew didn’t move. “It’s okay,” Rain whispered. His head was tilted so Jason couldn’t see the slight movement of his lips. Andrew didn’t believe him. Nothing about this was okay.

Jason sighed dramatically. “I hate to come between young love, boys, but ya can’t do that on the clock.” He smiled and stroked his beard. “Probably my fault for giving Rain that good stuff.” His wink turned Andrew’s stomach. Rain still didn’t say anything, his body rigid. Jason looked back and forth between them, calculating. “I tell you what, Rain, take fifteen and finish up with your friend. I’ll watch the counter. Fair?”

“Yeah. Yes.” Rain nodded, grabbing Andrew’s hand and squeezing hard enough to hurt.

“Wonderful.” Jason’s smile was all teeth. “Oh, and leave the cookies. I got myself a bit of a sweet tooth.”

Rain pulled Andrew away and they sidled by Jason. Andrew held his breath, not wanting to get the
man’s reek in his nose. Everything about Jason was revolting, but the worst was his nice guy act. Andrew had been the victim of too many foster parents who could roll out the good old boy routine for visits with caseworkers. They were upstanding members of the community, solid men that had respect. No one knew that they liked to abuse little boys. *Fuckers.*

Once they were behind the building Rain went down, crashing onto his bare knees, scraping them on the asphalt. His breath came out in ragged jerks and his shaking fingers tore at his hair.

“GODDAMMIT!” Rain yelled into his knees, his face hidden.

Andrew was kneeling in front of him in a second, hands on his back and shoulders, helplessness clawing at his throat and smothering his words.

“I am so fucked,” Rain groaned before laughing. His laughs were unnatural, hysterical. It was like the bad days, when Andrew was forced to take medication that kept him from feeling. When everything was an empty joke.

“Stop,” Andrew said, holding onto Rain’s shoulders. “Stop it.”

Rain didn’t. Couldn’t. He looked up at Andrew, tears in his eyes, falling down his cheeks, his mouth wide with false laughter.

“Rain. Rain. Rain.” The name had never felt so fake. “Stop this.”

“I… can’t…” Rain wheezed between laughs. His laughter was starting to sound like screams.

“Fuck it,” Andrew muttered. He leaned forward and brushed his lips against Rain’s cheek. Rain’s breathing hitched, the sounds coming from him catching in his throat. Andrew kissed the corner of his mouth, his chin. He placed a hand on the side of Rain’s neck and felt his pulse racing. He pulled back and examined Rain’s eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” Rain whimpered. “But kiss me. Please… please…” Andrew recoiled from the word and muffled Rain’s voice with his palm.

“Not that word,” Andrew said. Rain nodded, his eyes pleading. Andrew removed his hand.

“Just one kiss, Andrew. Final supper?” The high seemed to have been scared right out of his system and a bit of the real Rain peeked through. That tired humor. That bleak gaze.

“One kiss,” Andrew agreed. “And a name.”

“Deal.”

Andrew pressed into Rain until his back was against the building. Andrew’s knees rested on the asphalt, one hand braced against the wall, the other in Rain’s hair. He kissed him like it was the last fucking supper. Rain tasted like Thin Mints and Andrew knew he would never be able to eat those cookies without reliving this moment. Rain wrapped his arms around Andrew’s shoulders and held on, kissing back just as fiercely. When they pulled back, gasping, Rain gifted him with his name; whispered so quiet Andrew nearly missed it, the name tangled with their heavy breaths. “Nathaniel.”

Once upon a time Andrew had been a boy trapped in an unwinnable situation, dying by inches. He had thought he would never feel worse. This was worse.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so long since the last update! I've been busy and having a lot of bad days
“Ugh! Kevin is throwing up again!” Seth yelled. He raised his hand up to cover his nose but it did nothing to disguise the disgust in his eyes.

“No shit, you dumbass,” Nicky growled, shoving Seth away from the stall where Kevin was crouched over the toilet. “Fuck off!”

Andrew blocked Seth when he started towards Nicky, his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists.

“Back off,” Andrew said. He stared up at Seth and channeled every bit of his I’m unstable and would happily kill you reputation into his glare. Seth swallowed nervously and took a step back.

“I bet Allison’s bored,” Aaron added, coming up to stand at Andrew’s side. “Why don’t you go check?”

“Fucking groupies,” Seth muttered. He retreated to the locker room, leaving Andrew’s crew alone.

Kevin gagged again and spit into the toilet. Nicky passed him a damp washcloth and Kevin wiped his face and chin clean before accepting a bottle of water from Andrew. He took in a mouthful, swished, and spit that into the toilet, too. The toilet flushing drowned out Kevin’s groans as he regained his feet.

“Feeling better?” Andrew asked. He looked Kevin up and down. At least Kevin was standing on his own power; he had looked much worse the last time they had played the Ravens. And, miraculously, he was sober.

Kevin shrugged.

“He’ll feel better once we’ve beaten those mother fuckers and are partying the weekend away in Columbia,” Nicky chimed in. He pulled Kevin into a side bro hug, laughing when Kevin pushed him away.

“Here.” Aaron passed Kevin some mint gum.

“Thanks,” Kevin muttered. He popped the gum in his mouth and did some deep breathing.

Andrew could hear the rest of the team getting ready in the locker room. Dan had put on some bass heavy party music to pump them up. He knew Wymack would have a rousing speech for them and Abby would stand by looking calm and confident. They were undefeated and playing better than they ever had. Just as importantly, they were all motivated to beat the Ravens; after over a year of having to hear Riko trash talk their team, their coach, and Kevin, they were ready to make him choke on every poisoned word he had said.

The intensity was a good distraction. Andrew was funneling his useless anxiety over Rain into protecting Kevin and beating Riko. He hadn’t slept much since he had last seen Rain at Pipe Dream, his mind stuck on a loop replaying those awful moments when Jason had walked in on them and Rain having a complete breakdown in the alley. He couldn’t get Rain’s broken laughter out of his brain. Whenever it got to be too much, when the desperate escape plans seemed too tempting to resist, he would focus on Rain’s – Nathaniel’s – last words.
They knelt in the alley, the taste of Thin Mints in Andrew’s mouth, Rain’s lips brushing his ear as he whispered the only words that could have made Andrew leave him with Jason.

“He can’t hurt me,” Rain said. “I have that a-appointment.” He tripped on the word and his breathing got shallow. Andrew squeezed the back of Rain’s neck until Rain was in control again. “It will be fine. I just need to keep my head down. If this weekend goes well he may even forget.”

Andrew pulled back and stared into Rain’s frightened, dilated eyes. “Do you really think that’s likely?” he asked. Rain closed his eyes for a moment, like he was gathering his thoughts or courage or something.

“I think…” Rain said slowly, “I’m worth more alive and whole than I am maimed or dead.” He leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Andrew’s cheek. “Sorry for freaking out, Andrew. I think it’s the drugs. Paranoia, right?”

Andrew accepted the kiss and pretended to accept Rain’s explanations. “Don’t apologize,” Andrew said. “Ever.” He turned his face to the side so that his lips met Rain’s. They kissed again, slow and – Andrew would never admit it – tender. He wanted to stay so badly that his chest ached. He pulled away and bent down to kiss each of Rain’s scraped knees, making Rain laugh.

“All better?” Andrew asked.

“Good as new,” Rain answered, a smile lighting up his face. Andrew pulled him to his feet and brushed the dirt and gravel off the back of Rain’s stupid overalls.

“Text me.” Andrew said. “If I don’t hear from you I’m tracking you down, Rain. Even if I have to break into Jason’s house.”

Rain took Andrew’s hands in his and squeezed. “Okay,” he agreed. “And Andrew? When you face the Ravens, win for me, all right?”

Andrew kissed Rain again. He didn’t want to say goodbye. “You got it,” he promised.

Andrew jerked out of his reverie when Aaron elbowed him. Kevin and Nicky were ahead of them, leaving the restrooms, Nicky’s arm wrapped around Kevin’s waist as he cheerfully sang the Foxes’ fight song.

“You good?” Aaron asked. “You looked far away for a minute.”

“Lot on my mind,” Andrew replied, avoiding Aaron’s piercing stare.

Aaron nodded. “One battle at a time. Isn’t that what you always told me?”

“Hmm.” Andrew cuffed the back of Aaron’s head and ruffled his hair. “Don’t be a smartass.”

They joined the rest of the team in time to see Dan, Allison, Renee, and Nicky tackle Kevin onto the couch. Matt was bent over laughing and even Seth was grinning. Wymack stood to the side, shaking his head and hiding a smile behind his hand.

“All right, all right, all right!” Wymack yelled and Dan got up to turn the music down. “I’d tell y’all to settle down but we need every bit of that fire and solidarity to face down our opponents. Now, some words have said this year about our team. We’ve been called names, doubted, told that we have no place on the court.” Wymack looked around, making eye contact with each of them. His stern mouth turned up into a wicked smile. “But we know who we are, am I right? We’re the Palmetto State Foxes and we don’t roll over for anyone!” Dan tipped her head back and yipped
loudly, and the others joined in, even Andrew gave into the moment, to appease coach and to give Kevin that extra jolt of confidence. “Now let’s get out there and show these fuckers what we’re capable of!”

The team yelled, the noise echoing in the tunnel leading to the court. Andrew pulled his helmet on and gripped his racquet. Dan jogged by him and tapped her stick against Andrew’s.

“Shut those bastards out, Andrew,” she shouted, “and I’ll buy all the drinks you can stomach at Eden’s!”

“I’m holding you to that,” Andrew shouted back. Dan gave him a thumbs up and hip checked Matt.

The deafening roar of the crowd drowned out all of the Foxes’ banter and cheering when they stepped out onto the court. A sea of orange and white rose up in waves, signs and foam fingers shaking in time with the Vixens’ cheers. Andrew noticed one poster with his name and number on it and the slogan CRAZY LIKE A FOX!! written in bold orange. It was still an adjustment, having support from the fans. Most of the signs had encouraging messages for Kevin, as well as some thinly veiled threats towards the Ravens and Riko.

Andrew checked on Kevin one more time as they warmed up. Kevin’s anxiety was gone, replaced by a cool fire and determination that was dead sexy.

“We’re going to win,” Kevin told him. He was breathing heavily and he had color back in his cheeks.

“Careful, Kev,” Andrew said, pulling him close by the front of his jersey, “don’t make me fall for you.”

Kevin laughed and knocked his stick with Andrew’s. “I know better!” he shouted before jogging across the court.

Andrew took his place in front of the goal and watched as his teammates got into position. The clamor of the crowd became background noise and Andrew settled into game mode. For the next two hours this was his world and for once he was personally invested in the outcome.

The first forty-five minutes of play passed in what felt like no time and an eternity of split second frames. The Foxes played hard, matching the Ravens’ brutal pace. It was a frantic battle from the start. Fouls were called on both sides and Andrew tried to start a fight when Aaron got checked so hard into the wall that he had to be sidelined while Abby examined him; it was only Aaron’s insistence that he would live that convinced Andrew to back down. Andrew’s focus had never been better as he consistently blocked shots, sending the ball sailing across the court to the strikers. When they broke for halftime the score was a narrow lead for the Foxes, 1-0.

Wymack gave them another pep talk and cautioned Seth and Matt not to pick any more fights or they would be ejected from the game. “Pretend for the next 45 minutes that you’re a Trojan. Kill ‘em with kindness! Maybe we’ll get lucky and their hotheads will get benched.”

“Speaking of,” Abby interjected, “Check this out.” She pointed to her laptop, which was pulled up to the school’s Facebook page. At the top was a post by Jeremy Knox, captain of the Trojans, wishing the Foxes good luck and complimenting their game. Kevin was practically beaming. “If you got Jeremy rooting for you then you know you’re doing something right,” Abby said.

While the team strategized Andrew scanned the Ravens’ fans. They were an intimidating mass of
black and red T-shirts. The visual impact reminded Andrew of things best forgotten, reminded him of going to the Nest to retrieve Kevin. Dark corridors and oppressive red lighting, echoing silence, the metallic smell of blood and the tang of vomit, and Kevin pressed to his side as he stumbled away from his former teammates.

Andrew turned away. Kevin was standing next to Wymack, their heads bowed close together as Wymack showed Kevin something scribbled on his small whiteboard. Aaron and Nicky sat next to each other, downing Gatorade. Andrew joined them and put away his share of the sports drink that always reminded him of flavored sweat.

“Forty-five minutes to go,” Nicky said. “Think you can keep ‘em out of the goal?”

Andrew just stared.

“Right. Stupid question.” Nicky laughed. “That’s my cousin, y’all!!” He yelled to the fans and pointed at Andrew. The people in the stands probably couldn’t hear him but they cheered anyways.

“What about you?” Andrew asked Aaron. “How are you holding up?”

“Peachy,” Aaron drawled. “Abby gave me the all clear. Did you see Bee? Abby told me she’s with some of the faculty over there.” Aaron pointed towards the area behind the goal. Andrew squinted but couldn’t see make out any faces. He’d wave at her when he returned to the goal.

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The break was over too soon and the team charged onto the court again. The second half was even more intense than the first. The Foxes were tired and the Ravens had a second and third string to pull from, all talented players with almost comparable skills. Riko, of course, stayed in for both halves and Andrew faced him down again and again, taking special pleasure in denying him.

The Foxes’ held steady through the second half and then, in the last five minutes, Kevin scored another point. The stands erupted into riotous cheers and the Ravens got down right homicidal. This time it was Nicky that was sent to the bench, limping. Renee subbed in to take his place. If the Ravens thought they were getting a break with her on the court they were dead wrong. Usually the queen of “do unto others,” Renee had a special grudge against the Ravens and offered no quarter as she played defense, sticking relentlessly to her mark.

Andrew’s arms were burning from the number of shots he’d blocked and he was riding a razor sharp line of focus that was mentally exhausting. He felt like his brain was meticulously capturing all the details of the game. He saw Riko bearing down on the goal, read the furious expression on his face even with the helmet masking much of his features. Despite playing all-out for the entire game Riko still had stamina to spare and a lifetime of experience to draw on. But Andrew had a vendetta and a promise to keep. He had played under worse circumstances, on terrible teams, and Riko Fucking Moriyama did not scare him.

The next play was destined to make the highlights reel and the aftermath became a hot topic on sports talk shows for the following week. Riko raced forward, closing the distance to the goal, feinted to the left, and made a ridiculously tricky shot. Which Andrew blocked. Even he was a little stunned that his reflexes and skill had deflected it. He sent the ball up court and the clock ticked down the final minute of the game. Riko, the flawless King of Exy, watched the ball streak away from him like a man living in an incomprehensible dream.

Andrew twirled his racquet and laughed at Riko’s back. “How do you like me now, you piece of shit?” Andrew called out, loud enough for Riko to hear.
Riko whirled around, his racquet clutched in his hands like a weapon. “What did you say?” His voice was ragged and Andrew could barely make out his words.

“Oh, you need a repeat, you worthless fucker? How about this: you lose.” Andrew spread his arms wide. “You can’t even score on—what did you call me when I turned you down? White trash junkie jailbait? Too fucked in the head to play? Joke’s on you, Riko.”

The buzzer sounded, signaling the end of the game. The PSU fans reached a new level of loud and the Foxes clumped together in a victorious huddle at center court.

“Better luck next time,” Andrew said, walking past Riko to join his teammates.

It was intuition or instinct or luck that prompted Andrew veer to the right, or maybe he had caught a split second of movement in his peripheral vision. Riko’s heavy racquet came down in a violent arc, narrowly missing Andrew’s left shoulder. Andrew stumbled back, putting more space between them. Riko’s expression was wild, unhinged. Andrew had only seen him look like this once before and it sent a shiver down his spine. The pressure of the knives in his wristbands was a welcome reminder that he wasn’t facing Riko empty handed, and he definitely wasn’t alone. Before Riko got a chance to take another swing at him Matt was there, followed by Dan and the rest of the team. They crowded around Andrew, making sure to keep him and Kevin far away from Riko.

The referees swooped in moments later and hustled Riko off the court and into the poisonous flock of Ravens and their sadistic coach, Tetsuji Moriyama. Andrew didn’t take his eyes off Riko until he and the team left the court.

“Well that was exciting,” Seth drawled. “What the fuck did you say to him, Andrew?”

Andrew ignored Seth, ignored Dan as she tried to fuss over him. Kevin looked spooked and Aaron looked wary. Nicky was jittery and only Renee was cool, an icy glint in her eyes that hinted at barely restrained violence.

“I thought we were going to have to murder him,” Renee whispered, quiet enough that only Andrew heard her.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” He asked.

“Well…” Renee toyed with her cross. “I’d say he had it coming. Though after that stunt there’s no way he won’t get suspended. Can you imagine? Riko Moriyama: forced retirement at 20 thanks to a mouthy goalkeeper.”

Andrew smirked. “Sounds perfect.” He left the huddle and headed towards the bench, the rest of the team trailing behind him. They were already joking again, waving to the fans, clowning around. Andrew drowned out the banter and focused on getting his crew to the locker room. The adrenaline dump was making him feel twitchy and he needed to be away from the overwhelming stimuli of the crowd.

Wymack and Abby met him on the way in and tried to wrangle him with questions about the confrontation but Andrew shrugged them off.

“The officials are going to need a statement!” Wymack called towards his retreating back. “Don’t you dare leave for Columbia before talking to me!”

After cleaning up and talking with Wymack and several officials Andrew sent a brief text to Rain,
letting him know that they had beaten the Ravens. He stared at the phone, waiting for a response, trying not to count the minutes that went by. He was just getting everyone in the car when his phone vibrated. Rain's reply was equally brief, a simple *congrats! ur my hero <3*. Andrew almost smiled.

Eden’s Twilight seemed boring without Rain. Even Kevin abandoned him when Nicky managed to drag him onto the dance floor. Andrew wandered over to the bar to hang out with Roland and keep a closer eye on the others.

Roland came over as soon as he had a break and poured them both shots. He clinked his glass with Andrew’s, his smile as warm and sexy as it had been the first time they had shared drinks.

“Hell of a game,” Roland yelled over the club music. “We had it on in the break room. You were incredible!”

“Thanks.” Andrew accepted another shot, feeling pleasantly buzzed.

“Where’s your boy?” Roland asked. He was leaning almost completely across the bar and Andrew wanted to face palm him to get him to back up.

“Not here. Obviously.”

“Ohhh. Touchy.” Roland teased. Andrew flipped him off and turned around to look for Kevin. He was dancing with Nicky, Renee, Dan, and Matt. Aaron and Katelyn were taking a break at one of the tables and Andrew didn’t give a fuck what Allison and Seth were up to.

Roland was right: he was touchy. It had been hours since Rain had texted him and it was slowly driving Andrew insane, wondering what was happening to him. Last time it was a brutal lashing that had left him covered in bruises and welts, from his back down to his thighs. And this time… Rain had said he was worried about escalation, about the appointment veering towards something sexual. Andrew squeezed his hand into a fist so tightly that he could feel the knuckles pop.

“Hey.” Roland had moved around the bar and was standing next to Andrew. He looked concerned which almost made Andrew laugh, Roland, looking out for him. “What’s going on?”

Andrew tilted his head back in order to meet Roland’s eyes. The man was ridiculously tall, as tall as Kevin, and handsome enough to turn heads.

“Nothing you can help with,” Andrew replied. The silent phone in his back pocket felt like a weight, a constant source of worry.

“I can help take the edge off, at least,” Roland offered. He held his palms up in mock surrender and grinned so disarmingly that Andrew considered it. He had started all of this with Rain because he needed some release but all he had found since then was a world of heartache. And here was Roland: known, easy, willing to shut his mouth and keep his hands to himself. The alcohol and his earlier brush with Riko were campaigning for a quickie but the rest of him – Nicky would say his heart though Andrew would never admit to that sentimentality – wasn’t feeling it.

“Pass,” Andrew said. “But you can come smoke with me if you want.”

“Yeah?” Roland perked up. He went behind the bar and grabbed a beer, his smokes, and his jacket before meeting Andrew at the back door.

Several couples occupied the alley but Andrew ignored them. He sat next to Roland on the steps and
lit up one of the chocolate cigarettes from Pipe Dream. It was cold enough at night that he fought off a slight shiver. Roland talked easily about the club, some of his recent hookups, the car he was restoring with his on-again-off-again mechanic roommate. They talked for a bit about the game and by the time Andrew went back inside he was feeling marginally more relaxed. Still, the countdown until he was back at Palmetto ticked away in his mind. Andrew watched his family and teammates party the night away and felt the void of unease inside his chest grow.

Chapter End Notes

I’M SO SORRY IT’S BEEN TWO MONTHS SINCE THE LAST UPDATE. I honestly have no idea what’s been going on with me. As for this story: I know where it goes next but it’s been hard getting there and putting myself in that mental space. I promise y’all won’t have to wait so long for the next update!
Andrew woke up in a cold sweat, his heart racing. For a moment it felt like he couldn’t move, like he couldn’t breathe. The darkness pressed in and even though he could feel that he was alone in his bed his brain wasn’t convinced. He dug around in the sheets until he found his phone and used the light from the screen to check that the room was clear. He sat up and pressed his back to the wall and pulled his knees to his chest, folding into a ball of vigilance.

The numbers on the phone revealed that it was 4:33am. Andrew glared at the screen but even in his exhausted state he knew the numbers didn’t lie and the math was depressingly clear: he had only managed to get about an hour of sleep. He remembered corralling his drunken family into the car, driving carefully down the quiet streets. They had made it home by a little after 3am and he had gone upstairs and passed out on the bed, not even bothering to undress.

Maybe it was the alcohol or the stress of the game, his confrontation with Riko, and worrying about Rain but Andrew’s nightmares had returned. It had been a while since he had experienced such a vivid nightmare; it had felt so real that even now – wide-awake and safe in his own bed, his own room, his own goddamned house – he felt trapped.

Andrew got up and peeled off his damp shirt and tossed it into the corner. He flicked on the lights and checked the locks on the door and on the windows. He clasped his trembling hands around his biceps and stood in the middle of the room, breathing through the constricting feeling that made him want to throw up.

>You’re okay you’re okay you’re okay</p>

he told himself over and over. It took longer than it should have for the mantra to calm his mind, then his body. Andrew rubbed his palms over his chilled skin and hunted around for his hoodie. He found Kevin’s instead and shrugged it on, the fabric falling down past his thighs.

Sleep would be impossible now, the bedroom’s aura tainted by bad dream vibes. Andrew wondered what Rain would think about that; he seemed like the sort to believe in vibes and auras and energy. Maybe he would light a bundle of sage and smudge the room the way that one of Allison’s Vixens always tried to smudge the Foxes’ dorm rooms. Andrew filed the question away for later and headed to the kitchen to make coffee. His body would hate him for it later but there was no way he was going to stay in his room, lying on his back in the dark, letting the memories engulf his mind.

The coffee pot gurgled and the fluorescent bulb of the kitchen light buzzed. Andrew cradled a pint of thin mint ice cream, digging through the ice cream for chunks of cookie. Eat bite reminded him of Rain: the way his soft purple curls slipped through Andrew’s fingers; the catch in his breath and the tight grasp of his hands when Andrew had kissed his throat; the sound of Rain’s voice and his laugh and his sobs… Andrew pushed the ice cream away and buried his face in his hands.

Time crawled by. Andrew was on his second mug of coffee; his phone balanced on his knee while he tried to concentrate on the novel Bee had given him. The story was engaging enough but his brain wouldn’t settle, every few minutes he checked his phone for texts. Nothing from Rain. He told
himself to think rationally about it. Rain was probably asleep. Maybe his phone wasn’t near him. Maybe he had to leave his phone behind. Maybe his phone had been taken… maybe he was tied up and hurting—

Anxiety curdled in Andrew’s stomach. He got up and went outside, lighting up a cigarette and pacing back and forth on the patio. The sky was lightening to a sleepy grey and the weedy lawn was silvered with dew. His memory supplied him with images of Rain doing yoga on the lawn, his back striped with welts and painted with bruises.

Andrew’s hands were shaking badly. He squeezed his phone and pressed his thumb over the call button and held the phone to his ear. His call immediately went to an automated message that said the number he had tried to reach was no longer in service and suggested he check to make sure he had the correct number. Andrew checked the number and tried again. After the third attempt Andrew was done trying. He went back into the house and went to Aaron’s room, banging on the door until it opened.

Aaron stood in the doorway looking mostly asleep, his blonde hair disheveled and his shirt missing. He glared at Andrew.

“What.” Aaron croaked.

“I’m leaving,” Andrew said. “You’ll need to find another way back to campus. Call Wymack if you have to but I need to go.”

“Wait, wait.” Aaron reached for Andrew. His hangover was obvious when he completely failed to touch Andrew or get anywhere near touching him. “Why… why are you going? What happened?”

“I don’t have time.” Andrew replied. “This is an emergency.” He left Aaron and went back to his room. He needed his wallet and more stealthy clothes than Kevin’s enormous sweatshirt and his too snug club jeans.

“Andrew.” Aaron stood in the doorway, watching as Andrew changed. “Is it Rain?”

“Yeah.” Andrew pulled on a black long-sleeved shirt and slipped a knife into his boot. He had five knives stashed on him but they didn’t feel like enough.

“Fuck.” Aaron slumped against the doorframe. “Tell me, just explain… in case…”

“I don’t know,” Andrew growled. He gathered up anything else he thought might be useful and shoved it into his duffle bag. “His phone is disconnected. He never texted me.”


Andrew rolled his eyes and pushed past Aaron. “I have a bad feeling,” Andrew said. And he did. His chest was feeling tighter by the minute. He swore he could feel phantom pains peppering his skin. Every single one of his survival instincts was pressuring him to move faster. But instead of running away from danger he was heading straight for it.

“It’s five in the morning, Andrew!” Aaron whisper-shouted as he followed him down the hall. “You’ve overreacting. Wait a bit. We’ll drive over to the smoke shop together, case Jason’s place. Don’t go alone. Plea—”

“Stop.” Andrew’s voice was harsh and loud in the silent kitchen and Aaron froze, his body hunched over, making him look small. Neither of them were physically small, short, yes, but they had plenty of muscle from endless workouts and practices. It was a testament to Aaron’s deep-seated trauma that
he could manage to fold up like that. Andrew hated it. He took a breath, calming down before facing his brother.

“If you want to come put on a shirt and meet me in the car,” Andrew said, “but don’t try to talk me out of this.”

“Katelyn…”

“Katelyn’s safe in your bed,” Andrew interrupted. “I don’t know where the fuck Rain is but I’m going to find him and this time I’m not leaving him.” Andrew poured the remainder of the coffee into a travel mug. “Enough is fucking enough. Jason wants to send the mob after him? Fine.”

“Fine?!” Aaron’s voice was a strangled yelp.

Andrew shrugged and started for the door. “Coming?”

Aaron’s response was mostly unintelligible but Andrew caught a ‘yes’ somewhere in there so he waited, smoking another cigarette and flipping one his knives in his hand. It was almost enough to steady him, to keep the rapidly rising panic from taking over. If he ever saw Jason again he was going to bury this knife in his fucking eye socket. After he had slit his throat, of course. Andrew contemplated various methods of murdering Jason until Aaron finally emerged from the house. He was dressed almost identically to Andrew all in fitted black clothes with black boots. He had a black beanie pulled down over his ears, hiding his bright hair.

“You look like a bandit,” Andrew remarked.

“Shut up,” Aaron mumbled. He got into the passenger seat and passed Andrew a matching beanie. “We need to buy gloves.”

“And duct tape, plastic sheeting, and gasoline.”

“Jesus.” Aaron sounded more weary than appalled.

“Jesus is not invited to the murder show,” Andrew replied. His fingers drummed on the steering wheel as he drove out of their suburban neighborhood towards the interstate.

“It’s Sunday, Andrew,” Aaron chided.

“It’s actually Saturday. And we’re atheists, Aaron. Chill the fuck out and be quiet. I need to think.”

They traveled in silence, only stopping at a couple different Wal-Marts so Aaron could buy their supplies. At a gas station about a half hour from campus Andrew filled a plastic gas can while Aaron bought coffee and a dozen doughnuts from Krispie Kreme. Andrew ignored the lingering scent of gasoline and accepted a vanilla cream doughnut with pink icing and sprinkles. Aaron ate an enormous bear claw and kept sending covetous glances towards the lone cake doughnut.

“You really splurged,” Andrew commented. “You’re not worried about what Kevin will say?”

“Kevin can bite me,” Aaron replied nastily. “We’re on our way to commit multiple felonies. I want to enjoy my freedom while I still have it.”

“Stop being so dramatic,” Andrew said. “Our magical twin powers will keep us from being caught.”

Aaron had the forbearance not to remind Andrew of how often their twin powers had failed to protect them, or of the time Andrew had been caught and nearly locked up again. But back then he
hadn’t been trying for subtlety. Only with Tilda had he gone full on devious and it had worked perfectly. Andrew was hoping that he could turn this situation around just like he did that time. It was unlikely. He was going into this blind, with his brother in tow. That was never the plan.

“Look, maybe I should drop you off at the dorms,” Andrew said. “I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t want to be worrying about your safety while I’m doing whatever.”

“Yeah, right,” Aaron scoffed. “If you had Renee then I’d be fine with sitting out but you don’t.”

Renee had gone with Matt, Dan, Seth, and Allison to a hotel that Allison had booked. Renee was their DD and would be there to help with hangovers. She really was a saint and Andrew was already missing her knives and backup.

“Can I convince you to be lookout? Stay in the car and let me know if someone is coming?” Andrew asked.

“Absolutely not,” Aaron said. “Though next time I think we should bring a gun. Watching endless episodes of Naruto with Kevin doesn’t mean I know how to throw a knife for shit.”

“No knives for you,” Andrew said. Before Aaron could protest he added, “There’s an exy racquet in the trunk. Head shots, okay?”

Aaron smirked. “Zombie combat I can do.”

“Good. I’ll go in first. You’ll follow me but hang back a little. I don’t know what we’ll find, how many people, what weapons they’ll have.” He sighed loudly and took another gulp of his very sugary coffee. “This is a clusterfuck.”

“What… what exactly is your plan?” Aaron asked. He picked at a doughnut but his appetite seemed to have vanished because he didn’t eat it.

Andrew shrugged. “Get Rain. Kill Jason. Burn his house down.”

“But Rain… his secret will get out, right? What happens next?”

“I’ll handle it.” Andrew accelerated. They were only a few miles from their exit but it felt like they would never get there, like the road would keep unfolding without end.

Aaron didn’t say anything else. Maybe he knew it was pointless to argue or maybe he actually did believe that Andrew would be able to handle whatever happened next. Perhaps he was getting cocky but Andrew felt confident that he could; he had kept his promises to Aaron and Kevin, he would keep his promise to Rain.

After leaving the interstate Andrew headed over to Jason’s neighborhood; it seemed more likely that if Rain had been returned that he would be at home. He would need time to recover and the shop wouldn’t open until later in the morning anyway. Andrew was hopeful that Jason would be sleeping in, that he could break in and take him out with little fuss. But it was just as likely that Rain hadn’t been returned yet, that Jason wouldn’t be home. In which case it would be a waiting game and an ambush.

Andrew drove through the neighborhood, planning to park a couple streets over and sneak through the sparse woods and backyards to enter Jason’s backyard undetected. A dark plume of smoke and the wail of sirens caught him off guard and sent his heart tripping. Aaron leaned forward in the seat, craning his neck to see how far the smoke was rising.
“That’s a big fire,” Aaron remarked.

Andrew wanted to vomit. The smoke was coming from the direction of Jason’s house. He threw caution to the wind and sped towards Jason’s street, the Maserati flying over the speed humps and crashing back onto the asphalt. He turned the wheel sharply and skidded onto Jason’s street, only slowing when he noticed the crowds of neighbors huddled on the sidewalks, their gazes fixed on the mass of flashing lights and the still burning remains of Jason’s house.

Andrew threw the car into park and jumped out, racing towards the blaze.

“Andrew!” Aaron yelled but Andrew didn’t slow down. He pushed through the onlookers, coming face to chest with a large police officer.

“Back it up, kid,” the man said. His breath smelled like coffee and his jaw was dark with unshaved stubble.

Andrew almost lost his mind. He nearly knocked the officer over but what good would that do? He couldn’t run into a burning house, he couldn’t even ask after Rain, all he could do was stare at the wall of flame, the heat searing his skin even from this distance.

Andrew fell to his knees and threw up.

“Aww shit!” the officer exclaimed, backing away as Andrew coughed up his breakfast. His mind fuzzed out as he lost control of his body, as the dread turned him inside out.

“Andrew.” Aaron knelt down beside him, hovering but not touching. “Andrew,” Aaron said again, his voice hoarse. “It’s… don’t panic. We don’t know… he might not…” Aaron coughed, either from the smoke or the smell of vomit, Andrew didn’t know. “He could be okay. Don’t panic, don’t give up.”

Andrew heard the words but it took a minute for him to be able to do something other than heave and gasp. He coughed again, spat on the grass, and wiped his mouth. “I’m not giving up.” His throat felt ravaged and his nose burned from bile that had gotten in his nasal passage. Andrew stumbled to his feet and glared at the burning building. The cop was giving him the side eye and any moment now he would remember his job and start asking questions. “Let’s go,” Andrew said, grabbing Aaron’s wrist and pulling him past the pajama-clad bystanders.

He paid special attention to the murmurs, rumors and hearsay. The fire had been called in thirty or so minutes earlier. Andrew couldn’t believe it. If he had only left Columbia the minute he had woken up, if only he had never let Rain go…

Aaron squeezed his elbow. “Let me drive.”

“I’m fine.” Andrew shrugged him off but Aaron got in his way, blocking the driver’s side door.

“You’re not. I’m perfectly capable of driving.” Aaron held out his hand for the keys and Andrew considered smacking him. He surrendered the keys, instead. If he was fucked up enough to revert to being an asshole to Aaron then maybe he really wasn’t as steady as he thought.

“We’re going to the smoke shop,” Andrew said as he got in the passenger seat.

“Okay…” Aaron didn’t argue but there was an unspoken question in his tone.

“Look,” Andrew said before coughing violently. As soon as the coughing stopped he swallowed the rest of his coffee but it didn’t do much to clear the taste of stomach acid. “Ughh. Look, we don’t
know what happened here. It could have been an accident with no fatalities. Or it could have been intentional. But if someone went after Jason then they probably hit the shop, too.”

“And you just want to go on over and play detective?” Aaron asked. “They could still be there, Andrew!”

Andrew closed his eyes and pulled his hands into tight fists. “We don’t know that,” he said as evenly as possible. “I can’t just go back to Fox Tower and hope for the best. I need to find Rain. I need to find out what happened here and I need to do that right the fuck now.”

The fear that had made him throw up his guts surged, making it almost impossible to breath. His heart beat erratically and for a moment his vision blurred. Andrew leaned forward and gripped his ankles, his forehead pressed to his knees. He wasn’t going to have a panic attack, he wasn’t. Stupid, helpless thoughts clamored, suppressing his rationality. *Rain could be dead and it was all his fault. Rain could be taken and he would never find him again. Rain was suffering and he had done nothing. He had failed in every way, thinking he could outsmart Jason, thinking he could save Rain. He had broken his promise and Rain could be dead—he would never see him again and Rain had trusted him he had failed he had failed he had failed*

The car stopped, pulling Andrew from his spiral.

Aaron was hunched over in the driver’s seat, his expression strained, sick.

“Stay in the car,” Andrew rasped. He pulled a knife from his armband and opened the car door. Aaron had wisely parked in the alley, the car hidden from the view of the smoke shop’s back entrance by a large metal trash receptacle.

Aaron made a sound of protest but he stayed. Andrew surveyed the alley and tried to get his head back on task. It was still early and none of the shops in the strip mall were open. A lone Honda was parked behind the wing shack but Andrew remembered it being there the other times he had been in the alley; it was possible the car was broken down and couldn’t be moved. Andrew moved along the side of the building, slowly taking in the details. There was nothing out of the ordinary. The door to the smoke shop was locked but it wasn’t anything that he couldn’t break into. Andrew sheathed his knife and retrieved the picks he had remembered to bring.

His hands shook on the first two attempts and sweat beaded his forehead. He didn’t have time for this. Andrew forced his anxiety away and focused only on picking the lock. He was rewarded by the *snick* of the door unlocking. He tried the handle and pulled, surprised that the deadbolt hadn’t been locked as well, or that the chain locks hadn’t been fastened.

The door groaned when he pulled it open but otherwise the back room of the shop was dead quiet and dark. A blinking light caught Andrew’s attention; it was the security pad, the disarm light pulsing a dull green. The hair on Andrew’s arm stood on end. Someone else had already been here… and it was possible that they had never left.
Andrew eased the door closed and crouched down. His eyes darted around the room as he held his breath and strained his ears. He heard muffled voices, footfalls – two people, maybe more – out in the shop. He mentally cursed himself for not paying attention when they had pulled into the lot; he had been too lost in his breakdown to notice if the lights were on in the shop but Aaron… wouldn’t Aaron have seen something?

Moving with exaggerated care, Andrew crept into the storage room, hiding behind a stack of boxes just in case the intruders decided to come into the back. He pulled his phone out and sent Aaron a text, asking if the shop had looked occupied. Aaron’s response was: do I look like a dumbass.

Andrew considered replying that Aaron looked like him and, as the night’s events had shown, he most certainly was a dumbass. Instead he sent back at least 2 ppl in the shop. i’m checking it out. stay. Andrew pocketed his cell and moved to the door and – with infinite care – cracked it open so he could hear what was being said.

The voices were deep, masculine. Two speakers, their tones hushed but still audible, not that it was any help to Andrew. The men were speaking Japanese, he knew that much from being around Kevin. He was thinking about calling Kevin and making him listen in so at least he could get a translation later, when the voices stopped. Andrew held his breath and pressed closer to the door, sliding a knife from his armband. Movement in the shop had ceased and a faint, white light crept through the crack below the door, like the light from a TV screen. But Pipe Dream didn’t have a TV, not out front; just the old, clunky computer that looked like it was straight out of 1995. He had never seen Rain use it and had assumed it was just for show. The men had turned it on and Andrew ached to see what they were seeing, to get his hands on them and make them tell him where the fuck Rain was. He gripped the knife hilt so tight that it ground painfully against his finger bones. Patience. Breathe. Wait for the opening.

Time felt illusory as Andrew waited, his body on edge, ready to go at a moment’s notice. Plans raced through his mind, best methods of attack. Incapacitation and execution; he only needed one of them alive. Renee always said he was better when he faced multiple attackers. He could do this. Any moment now. Wait for it.

The men had been talking quietly while they, Andrew assumed, went through the files on the Pipe Dream computer. Suddenly the tone of their conversation sharpened, some argument taking place. Andrew seethed with frustration and shifted his feet; he flexed his fingers around the knife. One man talked over the other, ending the disagreement with a commanding word. Silence settled again but was soon broken by new voices, quiet and then louder. A recording or a video. The volume was too low for Andrew to hear what was being said, but he thought he recognized one of the voices. It sounded like Rain. Andrew bit his lip, trying to curb the urge to rush into the room and see the video.

And then he heard Rain scream.
It didn’t matter if it was only a video, if it was something that had already happened. Andrew was through the door and on the men before they even had time to register that they were under attack. Divide and conquer. Andrew took the man on the left first, landing a pulverizing kick to his hip and sending him crashing against the counter. Andrew didn’t wait to see him fall. His feet hit the ground and he spun into the other man, his momentum sending them to the floor. Andrew’s knife hand was up and he didn’t hesitate to cut the man’s throat, one hand wresting the man’s chin up while he sliced in deep and sure. Blood coated his hands, sprayed up and marked him from his face to his chest. The man made a gurgling noise but Andrew was already leaving him, turning to confront his partner who was struggling to draw his gun from its holster.

Andrew didn’t waste time with dramatics. The knife was slick in his hand but he didn’t miss. The blade sunk into the man’s hand with a satisfying thud followed by a choked off scream of pain. While the man tried to yank the knife out of his impaled palm, Andrew selected one of the pointlessly pretty orbs from the counter display, pulled his arm back, and knocked the man unconscious. He dropped the blood stained orb on the floor and the haze of violence lifted. Andrew stood over the men, chest heaving, arms hanging heavy at his sides. Seconds, it was over in seconds and the screams were still going.

Feeling like he was in a waking nightmare, Andrew turned his attention to the computer, to the video playing on the screen.

Rain was… was… Andrew swallowed down the bile that rushed up his throat, his eyes stinging. Fuck. Rain stood – more like sagged – at the foot of a bed, his arms pulled out away from his body and secured to the bedposts. He was marked, from his shoulders down to behind his knees, with vivid red welts. The abuse was just getting started as the man standing behind Rain drew his arm back and lashed out, the belt in his hand whipping against Rain’s skin. Rain yelled and his body jerked in response. He was shaking, bound hands squeezing the bedposts. “Count for me,” the man commanded and Rain gasped wetly before answering, “Six, my Lord.” His head was bowed, face obscured. The man wound up for another strike and Andrew lunged forward, pausing the video before he threw up.

He didn’t have time for this, not with two bodies on the ground. The time stamp on the video told him this was from a month ago – Rain’s first “session” – watching it now wouldn’t help the immediate situation.

The smell of blood was heavy, mingling with the lingering scent of vomit and smoke from the burning house. All of that, combined with the smoke shop’s earthy incense, made Andrew feel nauseated. He pushed into the back room and stumbled into the tiny bathroom, falling to his knees again and coughing up bile into the bowl. Blood dripped in, the man’s blood that had sprayed over Andrew’s mouth. He could taste it, salty and metallic, and it disgusted him in a way that the act of killing hadn’t. He had a man’s blood in his mouth. Wretchedly he thought, not the first time.

After one last aborted, wrenching heave, Andrew got to his feet, swaying. His reflection was ghastly: blood was streaked across his face, splattered over his chest, and he was literally red-handed. He blinked slowly and then got to work, peeling off his shirt and armbands before furiously scrubbing his arms and face. The blood and water splashed all over the sink, more evidence. Once Andrew was mostly gore free he dried off and pulled out his phone. Aaron had sent him a slew messages. Andrew ignored them and called his brother.

“Andrew, what the fuck?!” Aaron hissed. He sounded beside himself, scared. “Are you okay? What’s happening?”

“Aaron.” Relief washed over Andrew, easing some of his stress. He stared at his reflection, not
“Seeing it. “Any change in the parking lot?”

“What?” Aaron’s nerves and irritation sharpened his tone, betraying his annoyance that Andrew was ignoring his questions to ask a question. “No. It’s predawn on a Sun-__Saturday morning. Nothing’s stirring but the roaches.”

Andrew leaned his hip against the sink, willing himself to stay on his feet. His intense outburst of violence had left him drained.

“I need you to bring in the stuff we bought and my extra hoodie. Should be on the backseat. Put your gloves on and keep your head down. There are cameras.”

“Fine.” Andrew heard a rustling sound, maybe Aaron putting on his gloves or hunting for the hoodie. Andrew wished he could keep Aaron out of this. It wasn’t his fight. It wasn’t fair.

“Aaron?”

“Yes?” Aaron huffed.

“I killed someone. There’s another man, too, but he’s unconscious. It’s… messy.”

Aaron released a shaky breath into the phone. “Okay. Okay.” He breathed in and out a few times like he was trying to calm himself. “Worse than that one fight?”

Andrew nearly laughed but bitterness checked the impulse. “I slit a man’s throat. The blood is… everywhere. I think this is ending with another round of arson.”

“Shit.”

Andrew tugged his knives from the armbands and walked out of the bathroom while Aaron came to grips with the situation. He returned to the scene of the crime, not bothering to avoid the blood. He stared at the unconscious man and debated what to do with him. They were running out of time. He could try to interrogate the man here or take him hostage or… Andrew eyed the cameras. Was the footage being backed up to a server or was it only backing up to a device in the shop? Could someone be watching him? If so then it was too late to do anything about it but the thought raised goosebumps on his exposed arms and torso.

“Okay,” Aaron finally said, “I’m good.” He sounded steadier and Andrew took some comfort from that. “I got the stuff and I’m heading in.”

Andrew hung up and trudged to the back room.

Aaron gave him a wide-eyed look when Andrew opened the door. “What happened to your clothes?” he asked as he passed Andrew the hoodie.

“Arterial spray, as you medical folks say.” Andrew tugged the hoodie on and stashed the knives in the front pouch. “Let’s go. I need to get the live one secured before he comes round.”

“Gloves,” Aaron reminded him. He snapped his latex gloves for emphasis, the pop echoing in the silent room.

Andrew still couldn’t believe he had been sloppy enough to forget to wear gloves in the first place. The stress was getting to him. Everything about Rain’s predicament and the dangerous people he was tangled with was testing Andrew. He wasn’t sure, now that it was happening, if he would be up to the task. Saying he would face down mobsters for Rain was one thing, actually doing it was
another. As he tugged the gloves on he set his mind to the task: he needed to interrogate the surviving intruder and to do that effectively he had to stay calm, even though that was the exact opposite of how he was feeling.

Taking the duct tape from Aaron, Andrew led the way to the front of the shop. The door was hanging open, giving Aaron a good view of the gruesome scene. He stopped next to Andrew, his breath audibly catching. Andrew pushed past him and knelt next to the unconscious man.

“Come here,” Andrew said. “I need you to hold his arms together while I tape them.” He tore off a long strip and slapped it over the man’s slack mouth. Aaron crouched beside him and helped push the man onto his side. They pulled his arms behind his back and taped his forearms together. Blood from the man’s wounded hand had run down his wrist and soaked into the sleeve of his jacket; it smeared Andrew’s gloves as he held the man’s arms in place. Next they bound the man’s ankles, wrapping the tape around and around until Andrew was satisfied that it would hold.

Aaron checked the man’s vitals and eyed the discarded orb and the swelling bruise on the man’s temple. “Damn, Andrew. How hard did you hit him?”

“Hard enough,” Andrew replied. He was looking at the computer again, wondering if he would really have to transport this fucking fossil back to Fox Tower. “He’s not long for this world, at any rate.”

Aaron grimaced but didn’t protest. He stood and looked over Andrew’s shoulder at the computer screen. He inhaled sharply. “Oh fuck is that Rain?”

Andrew minimized the video and turned to look at his brother, taking in his sickened expression. “Yeah.” The nausea bubbled in his stomach. “Just a hunch but I think the man in the video is behind all of this.” He gestured to the men on the floor.

“Fuck,” Aaron said again. His hands drew up into fists. “How the hell did Rain get into this shit storm?”

Andrew didn’t bother to answer; it would take too long. “I need you to move the computer to the car. We need to get out of here and I’m still deciding if we should torch the place or leave it for the police.”

“Assuming the police get here first and not the associates of our murder victim,” Aaron said.

“My murder victim,” Andrew corrected. He powered down the computer. “You didn’t make it to the murder party.”

“Must have lost my invite,” Aaron remarked, his tone wry. He hefted the monitor and started for the exit. “But my schedule is open for the after party.”

Andrew stared at his brother’s retreating back, shaking his head. Either Aaron was putting up an impressive front or he was scary good at adapting to carnage. Though, Andrew supposed, after living with Tilda and the Foxes – especially after last year – there wasn’t much that could get under Aaron’s defenses.

The man of the floor groaned, the noise muffled by the duct tape, and Andrew crouched down so that he would be the first thing the man saw when he opened his eyes. Andrew slapped his face a few times to speed up the process. Finally the man’s eyelids fluttered open. His pupils were dilated, making his dark eyes look nearly black. He squinted at Andrew and tried to move away. His breathing accelerated once he discovered that he was bound and helpless, entirely at Andrew’s
Andrew offered his most manic smile – the one that had disappeared after he got sober – and tapped the blade of his knife against the man’s taped mouth.

“Your partner is dead,” Andrew said. “You have a chance to survive, if you answer my questions honestly. Do you understand?” The man nodded. “Fantastic,” Andrew dropped the smile. “Just so you know, if you start screaming I’ll stab you in the throat and leave you to drown in your own blood.”

The man whimpered and nodded again, his eyes glassy with tears, and Andrew, none to gently, worked the blade beneath the duct tape, peeling it back with excruciating slowness. Aaron returned while he was at it but didn’t comment, stopping only to grab the computer and the tangle of cords, keyboard, and mouse. The man’s eyes darted back and forth between Aaron and Andrew like he’d never seen twins before.

There was blood on the man’s face by the time Andrew was done removing the tape. The man beneath him looked terrified, not at all the type for this sort of work. He was young, college age, and the suit he wore only made him look younger, like a child playing dress up. His partner, now deceased, was larger and Andrew assumed that he had been the muscle of the operation meaning this man, the one gasping and squirming ineffectually against the tape, was the brains. Andrew wondered if the man would be smart enough to comply or if he would draw on some deeply buried strength and refuse to yield any information. He watched a trickle of blood dribble down the man’s lips and steeled himself.

“First question,” Andrew said, twirling his knife dramatically. The man’s wide eyes followed the knife’s dance before darting to meet Andrew’s gaze. “The boy in the video, where is he?”

“I don’t know,” the man stammered. His voice trembled and was so low it was almost like he was whispering. “I’ve never seen him before, I swear!”

Right. Andrew wrapped his hand around the man’s throat, squeezing tighter and tighter, until his face turned a bright shade of purplish red. The man thrashed beneath him, heels seeking leverage against the floor, body jerking like a fish caught on a hook. He tried to talk but his mouth opened and closed soundlessly.

When it looked like he was on the verge of passing out, Andrew released him. The man coughed and choked, his breath coming in painful sounding rasps. Tears poured down his face.

“I don’t know I don’t know I don’t know,” he cried, looking at Andrew with bloodshot eyes. “Please. I don’t know who he is.”

It sounded like the truth. Andrew pushed to his feet and walked away, willing his control to return, for his heart to stop pounding. His fingers ached. He could still taste blood lingering at the back of his mouth. Fuck. He knocked several water pipes to the floor in frustration. The sound of breaking glass – the act of destroying something – brought him a temporary calm. He shook his hands out and returned to his victim.

The man cowered as much as he could in his position. “Please,” his low voice was scratchy and hoarse. “I’m not lying.”

“I know,” Andrew replied, and knelt beside him. He patted the man’s knee, just to watch him flinch. “Second question: do you know the identity of the man in the video?”
The man swallowed hard and shook his head. Andrew raised his knife in warning and the man clenched his eyes shut and tried to shy away, yelping when the movement put weight on his injured hand.

“I swear!” the man panted as Andrew pressed the tip of the knife against his bruised Adam’s apple. “I’m low level, just a tech guy! I’m on a need to know basis.” Andrew increased the pressure, leaving a shallow cut, and the man hissed in pain. “I promise! I’m new! I didn’t – didn’t know what I was getting into, okay? I have debts and they—”

The man seemed keyed up, ready to spill unnecessary information about his life if Andrew didn’t stop him. “Shhhh,” Andrew interrupted, running the blade along the curve of the man’s throat, watching the purpled skin shift colors. “It’s okay. Let’s say I believe you. What are you doing here, Mr. Tech Guy? Where’s Jason?”

The man looked up at Andrew with pleading eyes, his breath coming in quick, jerky pants like he was about to hyperventilate. It was pathetic.

“I don’t – I don’t know about any Jason,” he moaned. “I was sent to wipe the computer, scrub any footage, disable the cameras, take any hard files that looked… suspicious.”

Andrew leaned in, his knee pressing down on the man’s chest. He could feel the rapid beat of his heart. “Did you?”

“Yes!” The man tried to nod and winced. He looked so desperate. “I did the cameras first and took care of the footage. My partner was looking over paperwork and I was checking the computer when you – when you arrived.” He shuddered, his gaze shifting to take in the prone body, the blood. “Did you really have to kill him?”

Andrew frowned. What a stupid question. “Would I be alive right now if I hadn’t?”

The man’s silence was telling. He stared at the body, his eyes going dull, as if he was finally waking up to the inevitability of his situation.

Footsteps announced Aaron’s return. He hovered in the doorway, his arms folded over his chest. Andrew ignored him and grabbed the man’s chin, forcing him to make eye contact.

“What sort of suspicious paperwork were you after?” Andrew demanded.

“Anything – anything about the drugs. We didn’t – I didn’t – know about the boy, the one in the video.” Revulsion and fear washed over his face. “That kind of thing…”

“You thought your syndicate only sold drugs?” Andrew scoffed. “That must be how you managed to sleep at night.” He motioned to Aaron and pointed at the abandoned files on the counter. “Collect those. We may need them.” To the man he asked, “Is the computer password protected?”

“Yes, it’s 69420.” Aaron snorted. Andrew wanted to roll his eyes but didn’t. “It’s a stupid password,” the man agreed quietly. Then, “Are you going to kill me?”

Aaron paused his work and looked to Andrew. Andrew met his gaze and whatever Aaron saw there made him turn away.

“What sort of suspicious paperwork were you after?” Andrew prompted. “About your organization or why they took out Jason?”

The man kept his mouth shut like Andrew figured he would. His life was forfeit the moment he
failed to accomplish his objective. If Jason could be removed – erased – with little fuss then there was no hope for this low-level tech guy.

“I could let you live,” Andrew conceded, “but you would be killed regardless and you would tell them about me. Also you have to ask yourself: will they be as merciful? I can give you a quick death, possibly a painless one. Which would you prefer, hmm?”

In Andrew’s mind the decision was easy and yet the man struggled, his expression shifting as he considered. Aaron left the room, shutting the door behind him with a soft click.

“How will you do it?” the man asked, his voice hollow as resignation sunk in.

Andrew touched the knot swelling on the man’s temple. “I’ll knock you out again. Don’t worry about the rest.”

The man trembled, his eyes sliding shut. Andrew thought he heard the man mumble something in Japanese. A tear slipped from the corner of his eye. Andrew grabbed the glass orb and swung.

When they left, Pipe Dream was in flames. Aaron pulled out of the back lot, following Andrew’s directions. The sun was coming up and shining directly into Andrew’s eyes. He grabbed his shades from the glove box and lit up, his fingers trembling slightly as he brought the cigarette to his lips. Rain was still missing and his leads were tenuous at best. Andrew exhaled, the smoke streaming out of the car.

He had killed two men. Burned a business. What, he thought dully, as they followed the signs back onto the interstate, would the rest of the day bring?

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! I am extremely sorry for the ridiculously long hiatus between updates. I'm going to try to be more consistent moving forward. Thank you for your patience and for reading! The kudos and comments are wonderful and I'm so happy that you're here! :D
Andrew was riding a razor’s edge of focus, any slip or deviation and he knew he’d spin out of control. He locked down any intrusive thoughts or worries about what could be happening to Rain. He had already had two close calls with panic attacks in one morning. He’d already killed two men, committed arson, and made his twin an accessory to all of it. There were countless ways this could get worse and the only way to get through it was by concentrating on next steps and solutions.

The first step was rounding up his people. He texted Renee and told her to go to the Columbia house and not tell the others what was going on. He texted Nicky and told him to keep Kevin inside and to not leave the house. He briefly considered sending Wymack or Bee something but quickly decided against it. If he fucked up they’d know soon enough.

There was one other person on Andrew’s list but he was saving them for a Hail Mary.

He tried calling Rain’s number again but he got the same message that the number was no longer in service. Andrew snapped his phone closed with more force than necessary and eyed the speedometer, chafing at Aaron’s responsible driving. He knew they needed to be careful; if they got pulled over they were both going to prison for a very long time, if they survived the syndicate. Still, knowing that did nothing to calm his racing heart and thoughts.

Andrew lit another cigarette and put what he knew about Rain into a mental checklist: his first name was Nathaniel, he and his mother had run away from his father, his father was in the mob, Rain’s mother had been killed in a massacre in Mexico, Rain was about 18 years old and had blue eyes. Andrew made a catalog of other physical features including scars, tattoos, and piercings. He listed Rain’s interests: yoga, hippie shit, Exy, cats. He considered Rain’s chameleon-like nature: his ability to blend in and disguise himself, even taking on different personas to suit the situation he was in. He tried not to think about the video, not yet.

Then there was Jason and the syndicate men. Andrew compiled dossiers on them as well. He had a terrible suspicion about the organization the men worked for but he needed Kevin to confirm it. There was so much he didn’t know but right now the pieces were falling together and the big picture was looking worse by the minute.

“Andrew? Andrew?” Aaron’s voice jolted him from his thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Andrew blinked slowly and turned to face his brother. They were at their exit and Andrew’s pulse kicked up a notch.

“You haven’t said anything since… since we left the smoke shop.”

Andrew tossed his cigarette butt out the window. “Do you think it’s kind of funny that we burned the smoke shop down? That it’s up in smoke now?”

Aaron gave him a worried look before turning his attention back to the road. “I, uh,” Aaron stalled.
“Um, no? I mean, I get that you had to burn any evidence that would have implicated us, but what about the police, Andrew? How will they find Rain if all the evidence is gone?”

Andrew shook his head and tapped his fingers against his knee. “The police were never going to look for Rain, Aaron. Rain doesn’t exist. And the people who Jason answered to will never be caught. If Rain’s going to be found then it’s up to us to find him. No one else will look for him.”

Aaron sighed and Andrew clenched his hands into fists. He didn’t need Aaron to tell him it was hopeless.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. When they got to the house Andrew had Aaron back into the driveway so they could sneak the evidence from the car without the neighbors getting a good look at what they were doing. He texted Renee and asked her to bring out one of their large duffle bags. She came out of the house a few minutes later and gave him and Aaron a fake cheery greeting. Aaron played along but Andrew simply nodded and took the bag from her.

Aaron and Renee went inside to find a box for the computer and Andrew quickly stowed the other gear in the bag. He’d left the paperweight – wiped clean and placed with the others – at the smoke shop, but he’d brought his bloody clothes, gloves, and knives. Anything they had brought to the scene he took with him. They’d have a bonfire later, a proper cookout, and he’d burn what he could.

They got everything hauled inside and Aaron set the computer up. It took a while to boot up so Andrew decided it was a good time as any to give them all a damage report. Kevin and Nicky both looked sick, and it wasn’t just from their hangovers. Renee was icy calm, sitting on the edge of the couch like a soldier poised for orders.

“Here’s what we know,” Andrew said. “Rain is missing. Aaron and I went to the neighborhood where Jason Reilly, owner of the Pipe Dream smoke shop, lives. His house was on fire and almost completely burned down. We drove to the smoke shop where I surprised two men in the process of purging Jason’s security system, computer, and files. I killed the first man and interrogated the second—”

“You did what?” Nicky interrupted. His dark complexion was ashen grey. “Andrew, please tell me you’re not serious.” When Andrew simply stared at him Nicky turned to Aaron. “Aaron, he’s not for real is he? God, please, no…”

“Nicky, I need you to pull it together,” Andrew said. He stared his cousin down. “This is not the first time I’ve killed someone and if you’ve been living in denial land thinking I’m a nice person then you need to wake the fuck up. This is happening.”

Nicky slumped to the floor and pulled his knees to his chest. He pressed his face to his knees and whimpered quietly; to Andrew it sounded like he was praying in Spanish.

Kevin looked shocked into incomprehension. Renee was the only one who had taken the news without flinching.

“Moving on,” Andrew continued. “Kevin, I’m going to need you to pay special attention because I think you can shed some light on this fuckery. The two men in the smoke shop were speaking Japanese. The man I interrogated wouldn’t give me a name but the group sounds awfully like a certain Japanese crime family we all know and hate. I don’t want to jump to conclusions or assume but we do have another lead. We have a video of the man Rain was supposed to meet this weekend. According to Rain, he had an appointment with this same man last month. Their session was filmed, though I don’t think either of them were aware that there was a camera in the room. I—” Andrew paused and collected himself. “I haven’t watched the entire video. Aaron, could you pull it up?”
Aaron nodded and clicked on a few folders before beckoning for the others to join him. Nicky stayed on the floor and Renee had to guide Kevin to the computer. He had the look of a man who had suffered a terrible nightmare only to wake up and find the nightmare was still happening.

“There’s probably no point in me warning you,” Aaron said quietly, “but this is video is beyond fucked up.”

Andrew stood behind Aaron’s chair, his hands gripping the top of the chair until his fingers hurt. Renee reached out to put a steadying hand on his shoulder but Andrew flinched away.

The video started with an empty room. The camera was positioned somewhere on the wall facing the bed; Andrew assumed it was probably hidden by a picture or piece of furniture. Two men entered the room, checking to make sure it was secure. They left and then Rain entered. He was wearing a suit and tie. His unruly purple hair had been slicked back. Rain walked to the foot of the bed and lowered himself until he was kneeling on the floor, his head tipped forward, hiding his expression from the camera.

Nothing happened for several minutes. Andrew wished it could have stayed like that, wished that nothing bad had happened to Rain. Aaron pressed the button to speed up the video and stopped when another man entered the room.

They all leaned in and Aaron turned up the volume. The man’s back was to the camera. A few things were obvious: he was young, he was taller than Rain, and he was impeccably dressed.

“You were informed of the rules.” It wasn’t a question. The man’s voice was smooth, deep, with very little inflection. Kevin stiffened, his eyes widening.

“Yes, my Lord.” Rain kept his head bowed.

“Stand. Take off your belt and give it to me.”

Rain complied, his hands steady as he pulled the belt off and handed it over. Andrew felt sick. He didn’t want to watch this. He didn’t want to see what the man would do.

“Take off your clothes and put them on the chair.”

Again Rain obeyed without hesitation. Jacket, tie, shirt, shoes, pants, socks, briefs. He stripped them off with all the emotion of a robot. When he was done he stood next to the bed, totally exposed to the man and the camera.

“Oh my God,” Renee whispered. “Oh, Andrew. His scars…”

Kevin groaned, his hand covering his mouth like he might throw up. Aaron had already seen but even he was affected, grimacing and looking away.

Andrew hated it. Hated that they were seeing Rain like this, hated the man in the video and the person who had planted the camera, and the people who had scarred Rain, and Jason, and—

“Do you want me to pause it?” Aaron asked. His finger hovered over the mouse.

“No.” Andrew ground the word out. “I need to know who this man is. Kevin, open your eyes.”

Andrew snapped. “Pay attention.”

The man moved closer to Rain. He never touched him, though he reached out, his gloved hands hovering over Rain’s skin as he examined the scars and the more recent bruising.
“It seems that Jason has been keeping secrets,” the man murmured. “Tell me, did he give you these bruises?”

Rain hesitated. “No, my Lord.”

The man placed a finger under Rain’s chin and tilted his head up. The camera only caught a sliver of Rain’s face, the rest blocked by the man’s head. Rain looked eerily calm, blank. Andrew wondered if he was drugged.

“Do not lie to me.” The man’s voice was quiet but commanding. “Did Jason hit you?”

Rain sucked in his lower lip, his body visibly trembling. “Yes, my Lord. But I deserved it—”

“I did not ask for your explanations.”

The man stepped away and moved behind Rain. His head was down, face obscured, while he studied the scars and markings on Rain’s back. Rain, given this small moment of privacy, allowed his mask to slip. Just for a moment he let his fear show before he quickly mastered it, bowing his head again.

“Before we begin, you should know,” the man said, “this is not personal. You are not being punished. I want you to stand where I place you and hold on to the bedposts. If you cannot manage to keep your hands there I will tie them for you. Do you understand?”

Rain stiffened, his arms shaking. But his voice was steady as he replied, “Yes, my Lord.”

“What the fuck.” Nicky stood next to Renee, holding her hand and leaning against Kevin. “Andrew, what the fuck? Why are you making them watch this?”

“Shh.” Andrew didn’t look away from the video. The man was moving Rain into position, his back to the camera. Rain gripped the bedposts, standing with his legs spread shoulder length apart. They all waited, the tension and horror so thick that Andrew could have choked.

The man took off his jacket, placing it next to Rain’s pile of clothes. He turned, his face looking almost directly into the camera—

Kevin fell out of his chair, landing on the floor with a resounding thud. They all turned to look at him but Andrew was there first, kneeling next to Kevin, gripping the front of his shirt.

“Who is it, Kevin?” Andrew demanded, his voicing cracking. “Tell me his name.”

“You’re fucked,” Kevin slurred. “You’re so totally fucked, Andrew.” Tears sprang from his eyes, dripping down his waxy pale face.

“Tell me his fucking name!” Andrew yelled, shaking Kevin so hard that his head lolled and his teeth chattered together.

Kevin shut his eyes, his face twisted into a terrible expression. “Ichirou,” he whispered, “Moriyama.” And then he passed out.

Andrew let go of Kevin and watched with numb disinterest as Kevin’s body hit the floor.

“Andrew!” Aaron pushed him out of the way and checked Kevin over. “Damn it… Nicky or Renee, help me carry him to the couch.”

Renee grabbed Kevin under his arms and Aaron got his legs. Nicky got out of the way, shooting
worried glances between Kevin, Andrew, and the video. Andrew paused the video, unable to stomach any more of it.

“Should we…” Nicky had the panicked, helpless tone of the thoroughly overwhelmed.

“No.” Andrew stopped Nicky before he could finish his asinine suggestion.

The truth was hitting him harder than he had thought, even though, from the moment he had heard the men speaking in the smoke shop, he had known. It had to be the Moriyamas. His brain replayed his last discussion with Rain, how he had panicked when Andrew had told him that the Foxes would be playing the Ravens, the Moriyama’s team. He should have pieced it together then. Ichirou was the head of the Moriyamas now and he sometimes used games as a front to hold meetings, though Kevin had implied that those meetings only happened in Baltimore. Still, it would be a convenient pretext to use to travel to South Carolina.

Rain might have been a hippie but he wasn’t ignorant; he’d been raised in the mob, survived on the run for years. He had figured out who was coming for him and he had still stayed, had watched Andrew leave knowing that it was unlikely that they would ever see each other again.

Andrew felt his rage seething, an uncontrollable force that had landed men in the hospital, that had led to him being drugged nearly senseless for years. He wanted to punch his hand through the wall, destroy everything in sight, not stop until he was too injured to keep going.

But that wouldn’t save Rain. His rage could wait.

“Enough,” he told himself. He slowly got to his feet and methodically cracked his neck and knuckles, each pop loud in the silent room. He imagined snapping necks and breaking fingers, leaving bodies in his wake as he made his way to Rain. When he opened his eyes he found his group huddled around Kevin, their expressions wary as they looked up at him.

“Get him up,” Andrew said. “I have questions. Nicky, get the vodka and five glasses.”

Aaron and Renee propped Kevin up and Andrew smacked Kevin a few times until he came around. Kevin jerked away from Andrew. Renee was there to brace him, hugging him to her side and whispering comfort and reassurances. Nicky returned and poured shots for everyone. Andrew knocked his back and held out his glass for a refill. Kevin tried to keep the bottle but had to settle for two long pulls. By the time he had finished his face was flushed and he was somewhat calmer.

“Kevin,” Andrew said evenly, “I made a promise to you when I helped you leave Evermore. I promised to keep you safe from the Moriyamas and I have. I also promised Rain that I would save him from Jason and I failed.” Kevin watched him, his expression uneasy, like he could sense where this was going. “I want to get Rain back from Ichirou Moriyama and I don’t want either of us to die. You know the Moriyamas better than anyone. What can I do to save Rain?”

Kevin stared at him for a long moment and then he laughed. It was an ugly sound, manic and harsh. It reminded Andrew of how Rain had laughed and laughed after Jason had found them together in the smoke shop. It was sickening to listen to.

“Kevin, I’ll ask you once: shut up.” Andrew got into Kevin’s space; close enough to smell the alcohol on him and his nervous sweat.

Kevin’s eyes were wide and frightened but he managed to shut his mouth, biting down hard on his lower lip. Renee rubbed his shoulders and back. Nicky sat down at Kevin’s feet, pressing against his legs and clutching the bottle like it was a lifeline. Aaron sat apart from them, waiting and watching.
Andrew took in the lot of them and wondered if it would be better if he simply left. He had gotten them all into this mess with Rain. If he left maybe they would be safe. He didn’t expect Ichirou Moriyama to show him mercy, to let him go, but maybe he could prove his usefulness. He could join them and protect Rain from within the syndicate. It wasn’t like he had much of a life out here; the others would be fine without him.

Renee gave him a piercing look and shook her head, like she knew what he was thinking. Maybe she did. Andrew sighed and let the plan fade like a pipe dream.

“Who is he, really?” Kevin’s scratchy voice broke the silence. “Those scars…” He shuddered in Renee’s arms. “I knew a boy. A long time ago. He had a burn like that… from an iron…” Kevin shut his eyes and shook his head, like he was trying to chase away bad thoughts or a memory. “Andrew. Tell me.”

“He said his name was Nathaniel. He didn’t tell me his last name.”

Kevin groaned and clutched his stomach. Renee, with lightning quick reflexes, jumped up and grabbed the trashcan, shoving it in front of Kevin moments before he threw up. Nicky rolled out of the way, holding his hand over his mouth before dashing towards the bathroom. Aaron stalked off to the kitchen so it was just Andrew and Renee keeping watch while Kevin was violently sick. Renee brushed Kevin’s hair back from his sweaty forehead.

Renee looked over Kevin’s shoulder at Andrew. Her expression softened, losing a bit of her warrior edge. “I’m sorry,” she said. “For what happened to Rain and for what you had to do today.” She stroked Kevin’s hair while she spoke. “You and I got Kevin and Jean out. I will do whatever I can to help you get Rain back.”

“You won’t get him back,” Kevin rasped into the trashcan. “He’s a dead man. Nathaniel Wesninski, son of Nathan Wesninski, the Butcher of Baltimore, the ax man for the Moriyamas. Nathaniel’s had a price on his head since he was ten.” Kevin spat in the trashcan and sat up. Aaron walked over and passed him a cup of water. Kevin drank it thirstily and wiped his face on the bottom of his shirt. “You said that Jason knew Rain’s true identity?” Andrew nodded. “Then Ichirou knows. He knows and he took Nathaniel back. The question is whether Ichirou will keep him or return him to his father once Nathan Wesninski is released from prison.”

Aaron looked from Kevin to Andrew, his mouth a tight line. Renee said nothing, though she looked equally worried.

“Do you understand now, Andrew?” Kevin asked, his voice broken, hopeless. “Your boy is fucked. You’re fucked. The only thing you can do is pray that you left no trace for the Moriyamas to find.”

Andrew didn’t expect a rousing cheer and he didn’t get one. He left his group in the living room and headed to his bedroom.

The door closed behind him and Andrew just stood there and stared at his unmade bed. Less than twelve hours ago he had been sleeping here while Rain had been taken. The nightmares that had woken him crept from his subconscious, latching onto his worst fears, projecting his trauma onto
“No, no, no.” Andrew balled his hands into fists and pressed them against his head. He tried to block out the image of Rain, naked and afraid, standing before Ichirou Moriyama while he was inspected like a piece of meat and not a human, but he couldn’t unsee it. How had Rain endured that? How had he been able to go back knowing what would happen, knowing who would be wielding the belt?

*How had he kissed Andrew and smiled and let him walk away?*

Andrew collapsed on his bed, pressed his face into his pillow, and screamed.
Rain had been waiting in the hotel room for so long that his legs had gone numb from kneeling and the rest of his body was stiff and aching from the cold. He kept his head down and his eyes open, focusing on the carpet pattern in an attempt to keep his nausea down. His head swam and he could barely keep his left eye open. He licked his lips and tasted blood; he had a hazy memory of his lip ring being yanked out. His nose was running and he had nothing to wipe it with so he carefully tipped his head back and snorted, loosening a clot of congealed blood. He swallowed the blood, his sore throat working until he managed to keep it down.

Rain had had innumerable miserable nights but this one was the worst in recent memory. He couldn’t imagine that his situation would improve. In his battered, light-headed state, he could almost see a dark corridor stretching out in front of him, with a blinding white light waiting at the end. It felt fatalistic or defeatist to daydream about his death but he didn’t feel up to faking or fighting his way out of this.

He thought of Andrew instead of worrying about what would happen when Ichirou Moriyama walked through the door. He hoped Andrew had won tonight, beaten Riko and the Ravens. He hoped Andrew was drinking with his family and teammates and not checking his phone. He buried the pointless hope that he would see Andrew again. It hurt; thinking back on the way they had parted, how he had told Andrew to leave and promised it would be okay. Andrew would know that he had lied. Rain imagined Andrew calling his phone over and over, sending texts that he would never read, not with Jason hoarding the phone, sending back false replies. His heart clenched around the pain. He would never see Andrew again… Rain bit his torn lip until the blood welled up again, spilling down his chin and dripping onto his thigh. He watched the blood trickle down his leg, slipping between his bare, bruised knees. At least Andrew would never have to see him like this.

The sound of approaching footfalls pulled Rain from his thoughts. He straightened his back and moved his hands from where they had been covering his lap. He pressed his knuckles into the carpet and clamped down on the shiver that made all the hair on his body stand on end. This was it. No one was coming to save him. Rain took a few shallow breaths and closed his eyes in a silent, earnest plea to whatever forces looked out for lost boys and runaways.

There was the soft beep of the door being unlocked. The door swung open and two people entered. With his head down Rain couldn’t see who they were but he assumed it was the two men that had brought him here earlier. They fanned out and searched the room again, ignoring Rain, before stepping back into the hall. Rain’s heart sped up and his palms prickled with nervous sweat as he listened to the even, measured tread of the man who now approached him. The door closed and the lock was engaged in a near silent snick.

Rain’s heart was pounding so hard he nearly missed the soft gasp Ichirou made as he came to stand in front of him. Rain stared at Ichirou’s immaculate dress shoes, wondering if the young Lord had ever kicked someone to death, if he would be the first.
“On your feet.” Ichirou’s voice was quiet, almost kind.

Rain struggled to obey. He couldn’t feel his lower legs or feet and he wobbled unsteadily, trying not to put his weight on his left ankle. He was glad he couldn’t feel it; it was badly swollen and the skin had darkened. Rain wondered if it was broken or sprained, either way he remembered it hurting horribly when Jason had thrown him into the wall and he had landed—

“Look at me.”

Rain lifted his head. He felt blood and snot leaking from his nose and over his lips and chin. His lips were tacky with blood, his nose crusted with it. Not so pretty anymore, he thought wryly.

Ichirou Moriyama was pretty, for a murderous yakuza, anyway. And young. Rain was never going to get over how young Ichirou looked. His youth, however, was deceiving; he acted every bit the part of a person with too much power. He studied Rain, his elegant brows drawn together in a look of deep disapproval. His dark eyes scanned Rain from top to bottom and his lips curved in a forbidding frown.

“Stay.” Ichirou held his hand up and then moved behind Rain. It was so like their first meeting that Rain was half convinced that the Lord would flog him just like last time. He didn’t think he would be able to stand for that long or that his arms would hold him up. The pain of the lashing would be bearable but not the torment of holding the position.

When Ichirou faced him again there was a look of cold fury in his eyes. Rain tottered, wanting to step away from the man but knowing that he had to keep still until instructed to move. Ichirou sighed and gestured at the bed with his gloved hand. “Sit.”

Rain sat, wincing. The feeling was returning to his legs and his ankle throbbed, sharp waves of pain radiating through his body.

“I instructed Jason not to lay a hand on you,” Ichirou said, “and he gave me his word that he would not.” He paused and Rain fought the impulse to squirm and look away. “Tell me what happened, Nathaniel.”

Hearing Ichirou say his name made his heart thud, the spike of panic making him want to hurl. His fingers tightened, desperately digging into the soft bedcover as he struggled to anchor himself. He wanted to bolt for the door, to deny the truth, to scream. But he had known this was coming. As soon as he had figured out Ichirou’s identity he had known that Ichirou would discover his as well. All those years of running and hiding, trying to live one more day, and his truth had finally found him — naked and wounded and defenseless — in an anonymous hotel room with the boss of the infamous Moriyama family.

“No reaction?” Ichirou smiled. He pushed his hands into his pockets and leaned forward until his face was next to Rain’s. “Just what I would expect from the Butcher’s son.” The words were warm against Rain’s ear and he was afraid, so afraid.

“I disobeyed Jason, my Lord,” Rain said, avoiding the topic of his given name and his bloody past. “He said he had to punish me. That you would understand.”

Ichirou touched the side of Rain’s face, just below his bruised and swollen eye. “I understand that he disobeyed me,” he said softly.

Rain’s eyes watered from the strain of keeping himself in check. Shock was setting in and he could scarcely keep his trembling under control. He didn’t want Ichirou touching him and using that gentle,
lulling tone on him. He would rather be beaten; he understood that, could compartmentalize that. He didn’t understand what was happening now.

“Come.” Ichirou stepped back and waved Rain to his feet. “Get dressed.”

Rain hobbled over to the chair and sorted through the pile of clothes until he found his briefs. They, like the rest of his clothes, were soiled with sweat and blood. Pulling them on was a small torture as the fabric brushed over his collection of injuries. Ichirou watched, frowning. Rain looked away and dressed as quickly as he could manage. He felt disgusting, having been forced to wear the same clothes for three days now. He remembered when he had stupidly told Andrew that Jason wouldn’t hurt him, on account of his upcoming appointment with Ichirou. He had underestimated Jason’s unpredictable rage.

Once he was dressed Ichirou looked him over and sighed but didn’t offer any commentary. He opened the door and Rain shuffled out into the hallway. The two bodyguards were waiting for them, standing at attention. They ushered Ichirou and Rain down the hall to the elevator. Rain wondered about security camera footage and then dismissed the distraction; if Ichirou had deigned to stay at this hotel then it was highly possible that he owned it, or at least the people in charge.

They walked through the eerily empty lobby, each step more painful than the last. Rain clenched his jaw to keep from making any sound, kept his head down to hide his battered face. He didn’t know why he was still trying to cooperate. Maybe the behavior was so deeply conditioned that he couldn’t unlearn it. Ichirou wasn’t old like his father, like Jason, he didn’t hold the same weight of fear. But there was something about him that frightened Rain and made him obey.

A black town car was pulled up in front of the hotel. Ichirou slid into the backseat and Rain followed. In the close confines of the car the smell from his dirty clothes and unwashed skin was even more noticeable. Rain wrinkled his nose but Ichirou pretended not to notice. One of the guards sat up front next to the driver, the other left; Rain assumed he would follow them to their destination.

Rain was too tired and pained to pay much attention as they drove. Ichirou sat next to him, his attention turned to his phone. Whatever text he was reading made him scowl and he said something in Japanese that sounded like a curse.

“Do you remember my little brother, Nathaniel?” Ichirou asked, his voice pitched low for only Rain to hear. “His name is Riko.”

Rain swallowed. There went his vain hope that they would pass the ride in silence. “I remember,” he replied and, belatedly, added, “my Lord.”

“His team lost tonight,” Ichirou said. “I wanted to be there but the local stadium lacks the appropriate facilities.” Rain remembered the facilities at Evermore all too well. “Riko behaved badly and got himself suspended for the rest of the season. Apparently he tried to incapacitate the other team’s goal keeper.”

Rain stiffened, his heart surging. He had to bite his tongue to keep from blurting out Andrew’s name and asking if he was okay. Tried. Ichirou said that Riko had tried. So Andrew must be okay, he had to be.

“That boy was never the same after Kevin and Jean left.” Ichirou shut his phone and slipped it into his pocket. Rain didn’t miss the dismissive way he talked about his younger half-brother. He sounded like a vaguely disappointed parent who couldn’t be bothered; Rain wondered if Ichirou had learned this behavior from his father, the late head of the Moriyama family. “I do miss Kevin, though,” Ichirou added softly.
There were so many things that Rain wanted to say and ask but he knew better than to speak out of turn. He was also worried that if he spoke he might betray that he had spent time with Kevin recently, had started something with Andrew, Kevin’s protector and friend. Rain chewed on the inside of his cheek, beating himself up for letting it happen. He should have stayed away from Kevin and Andrew, from all of them. Just knowing him put them in danger. He was such an idiot.

With the absence of his phone’s distractions, Ichirou’s attention focused back on Rain. He turned in his seat and looked at Rain, his hands laced together and resting on one knee. “I am curious to know how you evaded Nathan for so long,” Ichirou murmured. “All those years of him chasing you and your mother across the world. And then you just disappeared.” His dark gaze was piercing, unsettling. “I thought you were dead.”

Rain shuddered, unnerved at hearing his father’s name spoken out loud and with such familiarity. Their families were entangled in some way that Rain didn’t understand, and he was starting to realize that it went deeper than he could have ever imagined. Were Ichirou and his father friends?

Before Ichirou could start questioning him the car stopped. Rain blinked dazedly out the window and felt a fresh wave of fear and nausea. They were parked in front of Jason’s house.

“What—” Rain gasped, bile burning up the back of his throat and making him choke on his words.

“Jason disobeyed me,” Ichirou said. He accepted a black handgun from his guard and slid it into the holster under his jacket. “I have come to express my displeasure.” He ducked out of the car and Rain followed, stumbling up the familiar drive like a sleepwalker trapped in a nightmare.

As they approached the house Rain tried to determine how bad the fallout of this confrontation would be. Was Ichirou going to kill Jason or kill him? Was he going to give Rain to Nathan? His head was spinning, the ringing that hadn’t left his ears since his last beating made him want to throw up in the bushes. The dried blood in his nose made breathing a chore. His skin itched and he ached and he smelled and he just wanted this to be over.

Ichirou’s man pulled a set of keys – Rain’s keys – from his pocket and unlocked the garage door. He went in first, clearing the room and motioning them to follow. Rain went in ahead of Ichirou, nearly choking on the overpowering smell of incense and cigarette smoke. He tiptoed through the kitchen, noticing that Jason hadn’t cleaned up the dried blood on the counter and floor. Sloppy. The TV roared in the den, a rerun of a Michael Bay film, so loud that it completely masked their approach.

Jason was sprawled on the rust red couch, a Grateful Dead shirt stretched over his stomach, a box of Thin Mints next to him. He was smoking, as usual, the ashtray overflowing. The couch and carpet were marred with burn marks. Rain’s skin was marred with matching marks; all up and down his arms and back. There was a faint sour smell of old vomit. Jason had forced Rain to clean it up after the beating but he hadn’t done a good job.

Ichirou motioned to his man and the guard stepped in front of the TV and turned it off. Jason, half drunk or stoned or both, startled, his hand groping in the cushions for his gun. The guard beat him to it, pulling his own gun and leveling it at Jason’s face.

The sudden silence was filled with Jason’s heavy, panicked breathing before he mastered himself and shouted, “Who the fuck are you?”

Ichirou made his way into the room, standing next to his guard, hands clasped in front of him. He gave Jason a look so full of authority and disdain that Rain was surprised the man didn’t immediately throw himself on the floor and start to grovel.
“My Lord Moriyama.” Jason sat up slowly and placed his hands on his knees, inclining his head in a show of respect. “I did not expect you.” His gaze darted towards Rain, his expression momentarily shifting into something ugly.

“I want to know why you thought it appropriate to send this boy to me in such disgusting condition.” Ichirou paused and they both looked at Rain. He tried not to flinch. “He’s filthy, he smells, and he’s been severely abused.” Ichirou glared menacingly at Jason. “I told you not to touch him.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Jason began, “but this little whore needed to be taught a lesson about who he belongs to.” He spat the words at Rain, pointing his finger for emphasis. “He was giving it away for free, spreading those pretty legs for some college fuckboy. In my establishment! You said no one should touch him and there he was acting like a fucking slut—”

Rain clutched his stomach, feeling sick. He had been called worse, he had heard worse, that wasn’t what was making him reel. Jason was going to tell Ichirou about Andrew.

It wasn’t difficult to make himself retch, he was already halfway there. Rain doubled over, throwing up at Jason’s feet. It was mostly blood and bile but he made a show of it, coughing noisily and gagging. Jason cursed at him and jerked his feet away from the splatter. But Ichirou moved closer and placed a steadying hand on Rain’s shoulder. Rain shivered and spat once more, trying to clear the noxious taste from his mouth.

“I never gave this boy any restrictions on what to do with his body outside of our sessions,” Ichirou said. He helped Rain up, his hand lingering on Rain’s elbow. “It was not your place to police his behavior.” Jason’s jaw dropped. “Furthermore,” Ichirou continued, “I know now that you forced him to perform favors for your associates. To ‘play nice.’ Leaving all of that out, there is still the main issue – that you disobeyed a direct order from me and presumed to act on my behalf in a matter that does not concern you.”

“My Lord—” Jason tried to interject but Ichirou silenced him with a wave.

“You work has become sloppy since my father’s death. You have grown arrogant and power-hungry, going so far as to keep the missing son of Nathan Wesninski as your personal slave and bargaining chip. Did you hope to gain his favor when he was released from prison?” Ichirou’s smile was cruel. “You fool. Nathan Wesninski works for me.”

Rain had to sit down. He pulled out of Ichirou’s grasp and crumpled onto the carpet, managing to land away from the pile of sick. Spots danced in front of his eyes. He probably had a concussion. He’d been worried about it earlier but with everything going on— what did Ichirou mean, Nathan was working for him?

Jason looked just as shocked as Rain and that, at least, was something. Rain felt a sick curl of vindictive satisfaction that he wasn’t the only one floundering in the dark.

“Young Nathaniel was promised to the branch family,” Ichirou continued, “but his mother took him and ran. Now the prodigal son has been returned, thanks to your meddling, and I’ve decided to keep him.” His fingers twined in Rain’s messy hair and he tugged, enough to raise Rain’s head.

Rain looked up at Ichirou, feeling lost and found, but not in a good way. “My Lord,” he said, voice hoarse. There was nothing else to say.

“Nathaniel,” Ichirou’s voice was warm. “Would you like the honors of killing my former employee, or should I have my man do it?”
“WHAT?” Jason yelled, his face paling before going red with outrage. He surged forward but was forced back by the bodyguard.

Rain knew this wasn’t the moment to tell Ichirou that he had given up killing. His hands were shaking too badly, anyway; he’d make a mess of the execution. He held up his trembling hands for Ichirou to see and shook his head. “I can’t, my Lord,” he whispered.

“Very well.” Ichirou patted his head again and gave the bodyguard a curt nod.

It happened so fast. The gun, silencer attached to the barrel, fired twice, one round to the head, the other to the chest. Jason’s face was stuck in a mask of uncomprehending disbelief, blood trickling down his forehead, seeping through his shirt and dying his tie-dye red. The cigarette in the ashtray smoldered.

Jason was dead.

Chapter End Notes

Long time, no update. I'm sorry for the erratic updates with this fic. My goal is to focus exclusively on this AU until it is complete. Thank you for reading and for your patience and encouragement!
Rain woke from deep sleep, some instinct bringing him to consciousness and informing him that he was not alone. He tried to open his eyes but only his right eye would cooperate; something was covering his left. Rain reached up, his fingertips grazing soft fabric and an elastic band. He tried not to panic but his heart immediately started racing as his deeply ingrained fight or flight instincts took over. *What was wrong with his eye? Where was he? Who was in the room with him?* At first glance the room appeared empty, or at least half of it. Rain turned his head taking in the bare white walls and the single door before locating the intruder.

Ichirou Moriyama stood looking out the window with his back to the bed. He was wearing casual clothes, track pants and a matching jacket, looking like he was either going to or coming back from the gym. His hair fell loose around his face, free of product, and for a fleeting moment Rain could almost imagine that he was a college student, not the head of the yakuza. Which was a dangerous fantasy. Rain knew he shouldn’t let his guard down around the young Lord.

Rain quickly took stock of his situation. A brief peek confirmed that he was naked beneath the sheets and his injuries – more extensive than he remembered – were bandaged up. His left foot was in a brace and he had an IV in his arm. Despite all the damage he felt okay if groggy. Pain meds, most likely. He was desperately thirsty and the glass on the bedside table was just out of reach. He strained towards it anyways and grunted in frustration when he couldn’t reach it.

He heard Ichirou sigh and walk towards the bed. Ichirou picked up the glass and handed it over. Rain was too parched to thank him. His hands shook as he brought the glass to his lips and drank. Cool relief flooded through him, prompting him to gulp down the rest of the water, drinking so fast he forgot to breathe and ended up nearly choking. Pain flared in his chest and abdomen as he hacked and spluttered.

Ichirou gave him a pat on the back and nearly scared Rain to death, his body violently cringing away from Ichirou’s touch. Ichirou looked wounded by Rain’s reaction. He slowly reached out and took the glass from him before sitting down next to the bed. He studied Rain just as Rain studied him, both of them wary and curious, though of course Ichirou had the advantage. He knew more than Rain did, he was the one in control, and Rain’s life was in his hands.

“How are you feeling?” Ichirou asked.

The solicitous tone threw Rain off but he managed to answer politely, “Better, my Lord.”

Ichirou waved his hand. “No need to be so formal, we’re just talking. And ‘better’ tells me very little. Can you be more specific?”

“I would feel better if I had some clothes,” Rain muttered.

Ichirou made a quiet sound that might have been a laugh. “Of course. When we brought you in your
clothes were in no condition to keep and your wounds…” Ichirou’s face tightened. “The doctor opted to leave you undressed to better facilitate treating you. However, to make you feel more comfortable, I will see that you receive proper garments.”

Rain could hardly believe that his comfort mattered to Ichirou but he nodded anyway and tried to relax, though his powerlessness made it nearly impossible. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been laid up like this,” he admitted. His voice was scratchy and his throat still felt sore. “Not since I was a kid.” He noticed that Ichirou’s knuckles whitened, fingers drawn into fists. Interesting. “Am I gonna lose the eye?”

“No. The patch is to protect your eye while it heals and to keep you from rubbing it. The doctor can tell you more when she comes to give you a check up.” Ichirou cocked his head to the side and added. “It makes you look quite piratical.”

“I see… or I don’t.” Rain glanced over at Ichirou in time to catch an eye roll. “Sorry, bad joke.” He wiggled his toes on his left foot and felt a twinge in his ankle.

“I never knew.” Ichirou said quietly, his head bent forward so that Rain couldn’t see his expression, only the top of his head. “I never knew what Nathan did to you.”

Rain sucked in a breath. Chills raced over his skin, leaving him feeling even more exposed and vulnerable. Nathan Wesninski was his personal boogieman and even here, in the light of day with Ichirou Moriyama at his side and his father locked up however many miles away, even here he did not feel safe.

“Why would you?” Rain asked. “I was nothing but a chip to be bargained.” The memories, long suppressed, rose up. The hiss of the iron melting into his skin, the smell of his flesh burning, the pain that shot through his bones and didn’t stop.

The mental floodgates sprung open: the bad nights, the worse nights, the days when he was certain he would die, the rare days when he thought he could probably survive it only to be painfully reminded that he was nothing. He shuddered and tried to curl up on the bed but his body wouldn’t cooperate. His teeth chattered and he was so cold.

“Nathaniel?” Ichirou was on his feet, standing over him, his hands wavering in front of him. He had no idea. No idea of the hell that had been Nathaniel’s life, the hell that was waiting for him.

“Not… Nathaniel,” Rain groaned. He got his knees pulled up to his chest but he couldn’t stop shivering. “I’m cold…” He pressed his face into the pillow so Ichirou couldn’t see the helpless tears trickling down his cheeks.

“Okay, okay.” Ichirou sounded harried but Rain couldn’t focus on him. He had closed his right eye and was concentrating on being small, on curling inward and going away, on shutting the memories away.

Heavy blankets covered him and people were talking but Rain kept his eye shut and his face burrowed into the pillow. Soon the weight and the warmth of the blankets, and, he suspected, some special drugs, pulled him under and he slept again.

—-

The next time Rain woke up he was alone and someone had dressed him in briefs and a hospital gown. The blankets were stifling and he thrashed around as best he could, sending them sliding off the bed to the floor. That simple exercise left him sweaty and tired but there was no time to waste. He
had to pee and if he lay there for a moment longer he was going to wet the bed and that was not happening.

Rain got up, grabbed the IV bag, and hobbled towards the door. The large gown slipped off one shoulder and was distractingly flowy, hanging down past his knees. He was fairly certain that he hadn’t looked this ridiculous since Burning Man.

To his surprise the door wasn’t locked and opened out on an empty hallway. Rain looked both ways and made a guess, heading to the left. There were a couple closed doors up ahead and Rain tried each of them, finding a closet, another spare room, and, finally, a bathroom. The bathroom was just as basic as the rest of the house, the walls white and undecorated. Rain locked the door behind him and hurried over to the toilet, holding the IV bag between his teeth while he took care of business.

Once he was done he felt infinitely better. He washed up and studied his reflection in the mirror over the sink. His face was a rainbow of colors, all of them on the sickening spectrum of old and new bruises. He lifted the patch over his left eye and grimaced. The skin surrounding his eye was swollen and deep purple and he had a gash bisecting his eyebrow, the skin held together by small butterfly bandages. He gingerly replaced the patch and turned away. He didn’t have time for a pity party.

Rain peeked out the door, searching for cameras, listening for sounds of life. After months of living under Jason’s close observation it felt disorienting to be alone in a strange house. Rain didn’t trust it. Ichirou wouldn’t have left him by himself, would he? Rain shook off his unease and crept down the hall, intent on exploring while he still could. He needed a phone. Just one phone call and he could deal with whatever came next.

The hallway led to another hall but the doors here were locked. Rain’s hands were sweating and the shakes were coming back. Each time he tested a doorknob he expected to be caught and he wasn’t eager to find out the penalties for sneaking around Ichirou’s… residence? Safe house? Depressingly minimal labyrinth of halls and doors?

“Son of a bitch,” Rain muttered as yet another door refused to open. If he had a paper clip or something he could probably break in but he couldn’t MacGyver shit when he had nothing to work with. He was considering going back to his room and making a go at sneaking out the window when the door opened inwards and he was suddenly face to face with Ichirou.

Rain flinched and stumbled backward, hands flying up in front of him in an automatic defensive reaction.

Ichirou didn’t look even vaguely surprised to find Rain creeping outside his door. His cool gaze traveled over Rain’s body in a casual assessment.

“Did you need something?” Ichirou finally asked. He slouched against the door looking tired and worn, the top two buttons of his white dress shirt undone and the fabric creased and untucked from his black pants.

Rain lowered his hands and wiped his damp palms against the hospital gown. He noticed that Ichirou was now staring at the burn scar on his shoulder. Rain pulled the gown up, covering his skin. It was a pointless gesture; Ichirou had already seen him naked on more than one occasion.

“Yeah…” Rain said, his voice coming out higher than normal. “Any chance I can make a phone call?”

Ichirou blinked. “A phone call,” he repeated. Rain nodded. Ichirou seemed to be considering it. “Fine.” He opened the door wider and stepped aside, gesturing for Rain to enter.
The room was bigger than the one Rain was staying in but not by much. The only furniture was a desk and chair and an expensive looking leather couch. Ichirou’s jacket was thrown over the back of the couch and Rain noticed that he wasn’t wearing shoes but some kind of house slippers. Rain tucked his hands under his armpits and edged by Ichirou, moving to stand in front of the desk.

“This is… uh…” Rain swallowed his less polite words and settled on, “very spare.”

Ichirou huffed and shut the door, locking it. “This isn’t where I live, if that’s what you’re wondering.” He sat on the arm of the couch and waved at the desk. “Go ahead and make your call.” He grabbed his jacket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, a brand that Rain recognized as a Japanese import, and lit up.

Having an audience for this call was not what Rain had counted on but he figured he could still get the message through without Ichirou understanding it. He dialed the number, one of several he had memorized. Ichirou watched him and it was highly unnerving, like he was a specimen under observation. The phone rang and rang, and each moment the call went unanswered he could feel drops of nervous sweat sliding down his back.

C’mon c’mon he prayed, his fingers tapping on the desk. Rain bit his lip and was sharply reminded that his lip was split. He licked at the bead of blood and sucked his lower lip in. Ichirou was still gazing at him, his eyes heavy lidded. He tipped his head back and exhaled a graceful stream of smoke. Rain couldn’t help but inhale the secondhand smoke; it made him feel slightly more settled with smoke in his lungs and blood on his tongue.

At last the call was answered.

“EDEN’S!” The voice on the other end shouted. Rain winced and held the phone away from his ear; the loud club music and noise was jarring in the quiet office.

“Is this Roland?” Rain asked. Ichirou’s eyebrow quirked up and Rain felt himself blushing.

“What? Speak up, kid.”

“ROLAND?” Rain felt like he was going to die of embarrassment, yelling in the middle of Ichirou’s office.

“Yeah! Who’s – dude get the fuck off – who’s this?” Roland sounded amused and a little tipsy. Rain could hear swearing and laughing in the background.

“Rain!” He shouted into the phone. Rain screwed his eyes shut, pretending Ichirou wasn’t sitting there studying him with that knowing look.

“Holy shit Rain!” Roland’s bellow of recognition was even louder. “Hold on.”

The hold music – an instrumental rendition of Wonderwall – went on forever. At least two minutes. Ichirou pointed at the chair behind the desk and Rain sank into it, grateful to be off his aching ankle but uncomfortable sitting in Ichirou’s space. Ichirou got up to grab an ashtray from the desk and went back to the couch, stretching out with the ashtray resting on his flat stomach. He finished off his cigarette and immediately lit another. The small, unventilated office felt close and intensely private. Rain plucked at his gown and bounced his right foot while he waited for Roland to pick up the fucking phone.

“Hey, hey,” Roland’s voice was still loud but at least he wasn’t yelling anymore. “Rain where the fuck have you been? An—”
“I got another job,” Rain said quickly, cutting Roland off before he could say anything about Andrew. “It was sudden but uh, it’s not a bad gig.”

“Shit, man. I heard about Pipe Dream burning down… we were all losing our damn minds, not hearing anything from you.”

Rain nearly choked. The smoke shop burned down? He was dying to ask about it but he couldn’t, not with Ichirou right there listening in. “Uh, yeah, man, that’s why I had to take this new job. But I need you to do me a favor, Roland, it’s important, man.”

Roland swore, going on about how some people couldn’t be bothered to answer their phones, but he agreed to help Rain out.

“Cool, man. I need you to get word to my regulars. They’re probably wondering where I vanished off to—” Ichirou sat up on the couch and gave Rain a warning look. Rain nodded at him and scratched at his throat. He had to find a way to make Andrew understand he was okay. “So, um, let them know it’s all good, okay? If they need a hook up you know that scary blond bastard will find something for them. He’s reliable like that, always got your back.”

There was a long pause on the other end and Rain held his breath. All he wanted was for Andrew to know he was all right. That he was alive. It worried him to hear that the smoke shop was gone – what must Andrew be thinking with both the shop and Jason’s house up in flames? He had really fucked up.

“Yeah…” Roland said slowly. “Yeah, I can do that. You sure you’re good, Rain? If I needed to call you…”

“That’s not going to possible,” Rain answered. “Just get the word out, okay?”

“Sure, man.” Roland sighed heavily, like he wanted to say more but let it go. “Good luck, Rainbow. We’re all here for you, you know?”

Rain blinked away the tears that threatened to spill and ducked his head so that Ichirou couldn’t see. “Thanks,” he said, voice thick and unsteady. “Peace out, bro.”

Roland laughed and that was the last thing Rain heard before the call disconnected. He took several deep breaths and scrubbed at his face, feeling every dull ache from the bruises and cuts. When he looked up he found Ichirou staring at him again.

“You’re quite the chameleon,” Ichirou remarked. He took a deep drag and exhaled slowly. “Who are you beneath all of these masks, Nathaniel?”


Ichirou smiled but his eyes said he didn’t believe it. “Was it not Nathaniel that I met in the hotel room?”

Rain shook his head, his tangled hair falling over his forehead. “That was no one,” he whispered.

Ichirou leaned forward. “Explain.”

“Have you… haven’t you ever needed to go away?” he asked. Rain picked at a scab on his knee and tried to get his thoughts together. “When things are too much I just… mentally exit stage left or whatever. My body can take whatever it has to, doesn’t mean that my brain needs to stick around for the show.”
“Hmm.” Ichirou ground out his cigarette and stood, stretching so that his shirt rose up and revealed a sliver of his stomach. It didn’t do anything for Rain except put him even more on edge. “There’s a term for that,” Ichirou said. “Dissociation.” He walked over to the desk and perched on the edge, his leg brushing against Rain’s. “Do you remember what happens to you when you go away?”

Rain stared at Ichirou’s knee. He remembered what happened in the hotel room. He remembered that Ichirou hadn’t touched him, only used his belt on him until Rain’s back and ass and thighs were thoroughly covered with stinging lashes. Beyond that his history of abuse stretched back and back, his earliest memories of pain and Nathan. The only gaps came from loss of consciousness. Not that his memory was perfect by any means; there were wide swaths of… nothing. Maybe he didn’t remember after all. Panic pricked at his edges, fear tearing at his façade. Rain started to tremble.

“If not Nathaniel,” Ichirou said, his voice oddly gentle, “what should I call you?”

“Rain is fine.” The other names didn’t matter, they were mostly jokes his mother made at the expense of the kind people they lived with, names like Starboy or Pippin or Sunbeam. He had held onto Rain the longest, had grown to love the boy he became. And it was the name that Andrew called him. *Rain. Rainbow.* He would give anything to hear Andrew say his name again.

“I like it.” Rain glanced up and found Ichirou was smiling at him. “Rain.” He reached out and tousled Rain’s purple hair. “I think I even like *you.*”

That was a shock. Rain kept perfectly still as Ichirou tangled his fingers in his hair and tugged his head back. His smoky breath was cool on Rain’s neck. His silky hair tickled Rain’s cheek.

When Ichirou’s lips touched his skin Rain jerked away, his hair tearing. His heart jumped in his chest, pounding hard enough to scare him. He felt cold to his core.

“D-don’t,” Rain stuttered. He clenched his hands into fists in his lap. He couldn’t hit Ichirou, he couldn’t. “I – I don’t want you to.”

Ichirou released him and leaned back, his palms braced on the desk. He didn’t look like a ruthless yakuza right then, he looked like a guy who wasn’t used to being told ‘no’ and didn’t know what to do about it.

“I thought you played nice when you needed to,” Ichirou said. There wasn’t any accusation in his tone, more like curiosity.

Rain tried to reign in his discomfort and answer him. He had to play this smart, had to set some boundaries, if such a thing was even allowed.

“*Had* to,” Rain corrected him. “You see what happened when I did something Jason didn’t like.” He glanced down at the bandages that wrapped the burns on his arms. “Besides, I was either stoned or mostly drunk when… when that stuff happened.”

Ichirou frowned. “I see.” He sighed and his posture slumped even more. He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. Rain couldn’t reconcile the man in front of him with the one who had flogged him over a month ago or the one who had ordered Jason’s execution. “This has all become so complicated,” Ichirou murmured, more to himself than to Rain.

Before Ichirou could explain what he meant he was interrupted by a knock on the door. Without bothering to tuck in his shirt or fix his appearance Ichirou got up and answered the door.

“My Lord.” A woman in a white coat stood in the hall, an anxious look on her face. “Your… guest… seems to have wandered off. I apologize for the inconvenience, but have you seen him?”
“You mean this guest?” Ichirou stepped to the side and nodded at Rain.

The woman looked between the two of them, her keen eyes taking in Ichirou’s disheveled appearance and Rain’s rumpled hospital gown. A blush rose on the woman’s face and it made Rain want to disappear.

“Ah… I apologize for interrupting,” the woman stammered.

Ichirou didn’t comment on that and the awkwardness rose until Rain seriously considered hiding under the desk.

“Since you’ve already interrupted us,” Ichirou said, “you may as well take Rain back for a check up.”

“Of course, my Lord.”

Rain knew a dismissal when he heard it. He got up on unsteady legs and shuffled out of the room. He ignored the assistance the woman offered him, preferring to lean on the wall. As he limped away he was excruciatingly aware of the way the gown was open in the back, revealing his body to Ichirou.

The young Lord was right; this was all getting far too complicated.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for all the delays! I’ve been working through some stuff and trying to figure out this story. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

TW: thoughts of self harm, mental breakdown

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In the end there was nothing to be done.

As night approached and a plan to find and rescue Rain failed to materialize, Andrew was sucked deeper into his spiral of helpless rage.

Kevin dropped out first, more like passed out. He had locked himself in Nicky’s room with most of their stash of alcohol and refused to come out. They could have picked the lock, of course, or broke down the door if it came to that, but Aaron said that Kevin wasn’t in a state to contribute anything helpful and Andrew had to agree.

Nicky wasn’t much better. He couldn’t get past Andrew killing two men and burning down the smoke shop. Nicky was kinder than the rest of them, softer. Even though he had always known what Andrew was capable of it was clear that he had never truly believed it. Now he had a broken look in his eyes whenever he stole a glance at his cousins. Andrew hated it. He told Nicky to go sit outside Kevin’s room. There was no reason for it, other than getting him and his judgmental gaze out of the room.

Aaron was quiet and Andrew had no idea what was passing through his twin’s mind. They had been drinking steadily since lunchtime and the more Aaron drank, the more he withdrew.

So it was down to Renee and Andrew to plot and plan. Renee had stepped up in a big way, coming through for Andrew just like she had promised she would. And Andrew got to see yet another side of her, this intense and calculating persona that could watch a horrifying video without blinking and dissect his actions at the smoke shop and objectively critique his methods.

“I realize that they had to die,” Renee said, leaning back in her chair at the kitchen table, “but it’s a shame you couldn’t have brought the tech guy back here for interrogation. We might have learned more.”

Andrew stabbed the table with his knife, working the blade back and forth, digging up splinters of wood.

“He told me all he could,” Andrew replied. “He would have been worthless as a hostage.”

Renee looked unconvinced. “He could have put you in contact with someone at the very least.”

Andrew suppressed a sigh. “Maybe. But then we’d have had to kill him here and dispose of the body. Would have been a hell of a lot more work. And Nicky would have had even more of a shit fit.”

They lapsed into silence and Andrew dug and dug at the table until he broke through to the other side. He thought about the way Rain had sat here, right next to him, and played that ridiculous game just so he could hold his hand. He thought about Rain standing in the kitchen doorway, hair damp
and dripping onto Andrew’s shirt. He thought of Rain sleeping in his bed while he took the couch, leaving the sheets smelling faintly of incense. He had had Rain here, safe and sound, and he had let him go. It killed him.

“Andrew?” Renee’s voice broke into his thoughts.

Andrew blinked. His hand ached from clutching the knife and the table looked butchered.

“I don’t know what to do,” he said. He swallowed around the painful ache in his throat. “He’s gone, Renee.”

Renee nodded and reached out, her palm up. Andrew stared uncomprehendingly at her hand. She wiggled her fingers and Andrew sighed and surrendered the knife. She knew him better than anyone.

“Take the night,” she suggested. “Eat. Shower. Sleep. You’re running on fumes, Andrew, and you’re not thinking straight.”

“I never think straight,” he muttered.

Renee cracked a small smile. “Then let your gay brain get some rest. We’ll come at this tomorrow refreshed and I guarantee we’ll find a solution that we can’t see right now. Okay?”

It sounded reasonable. Sensible. It was not what Andrew wanted to hear.

“Here.” Renee dug in her bag and produced two pills, long and blue, sealed between plastic and foil. “Tylenol PM. I know you’ll stay up all night otherwise and get more unstable by the minute.”

“I’m stable,” Andrew said between gritted teeth.

Now it was Renee’s turn to sigh. “Don’t bullshit me, Minyard. You just dug a hole in a perfectly good table and haven’t contributed a single productive idea in hours. Get some fucking sleep.”

Her words held more menace than the knife resting at her elbow. Andrew relented and swallowed the pills with the last of the vodka. Renee took the bottle to the sink and filled it with water and passed it back to him. He gave her a dead eyed look and she smiled sweetly.

“I’ll call coach,” she offered. “Tell him we’re all taking a personal day tomorrow. You can thank me later.”

It was a big favor. Andrew wasn’t sure what he would have told Wymack. He hadn’t even thought about Exy or class or any of his obligations other than keeping an eye on his family, and he’d only accomplished that by putting them all on house arrest. He wasn’t any good to them right now and he was grateful that Renee was here to watch out for them, steely-eyed and sober. Andrew mumbled a broken “thanks” as he got to his feet and exited the kitchen.

Andrew stumbled up the stairs, the alcohol hitting him hard now that he was up and moving. His head swam and it was a struggle to keep going forward. He hadn’t been this shitfaced since… he couldn’t recall.

All he wanted was to be alone… He blinked and shook his head. That was a lie. All he wanted was Rain back. He wanted Rain here. He wanted all the people trying to take Rain away to die. He wanted Rain to come back and never leave.

He pushed the bedroom door open and, instead of finding an empty room in which he could fall apart in privacy, he found Aaron.
Aaron was sitting cross-legged at the foot of the bed, hunched over his phone, the white light from the screen shining on his face. He glanced up at Andrew, nodded once, and went back to texting, his thumbs flying over the tiny keys.

“Aaron.” Andrew glared at him and tried to assemble words. Fucking vodka. Fucking pills. “Get out.”

Aaron shook his head and hunched his shoulders even more, a silent show of stubbornness.

“Sibling bonding is over,” Andrew slurred. He kicked off his shoes and fell into the wall, banging his shoulder hard. “Ow.”

“Jesus,” Aaron muttered. He put his phone down and looked at Andrew. “How much did you drink?”

“All of it.” Andrew hiccuped and tasted bile in the back of his throat. Nasty. He pushed off the wall, aiming for the bed, but Aaron got up and intercepted him.

“No you don’t.” Aaron held onto Andrew’s shoulders, keeping him steady. Andrew always forgot how strong his brother was; he couldn’t seem to get past his first impressions of Aaron: small, beaten, strung out. Now here he was keeping him upright. What a fucking world.

Andrew tottered and hiccuped again. Aaron wrinkled his nose.

“You need a shower and you need to brush your teeth.” Andrew made a sound of protest and Aaron gave him a stern look. “Trust me,” he said, “you’ll thank me in the morning.”

Then his brother steered him out of the bedroom, down the hall, and left him in the bathroom. Andrew stood on the tile floor and stared at his reflection in the mirror. He looked like shit.

Aaron came back, bearing an armload of clean clothes. He dropped them on the sink and gave Andrew a nudge towards the shower.

“You’re on your own from here,” Aaron said. “Just don’t slip in the shower and die.”

Andrew thought about saying something but didn’t trust his stomach to behave once his mouth was open. He shut the door in Aaron’s face.

Getting undressed and into the shower took all of his focus and once he was beneath the warm spray of water standing up seemed like too much work. Andrew sat in the bottom of the tub, water splattering over his head and chest. He gave into gravity and lay down, nearly able to stretch out completely flat. He closed his eyes and shivered. The lingering smell of smoke and vomit and blood rose up in the steam, making him gag. His hands trembled when he scrubbed them over his face.

The steady beat of water pummeled his skin like a sudden, violent downpour. A stupid children’s song haunted him: Rain rain go away come again another day. It bled into another song ashes to ashes we all fall down

Andrew’s stomach cramped and he choked down bile.

Had he ever failed anyone so completely as Rain? No.

Rain Rain go away ashes to ashes we all fall down

His failure bore down on him, smothering, just as his fear for Rain crested, breaking his mind bit by
bit. He felt like he was twelve years old again. Trapped. Lost. Alone.

Andrew pressed the heels of his hands against his closed eyes until he saw red splotches. He wasn’t going to fucking cry. He bit down on his bottom lip until blood burst in his mouth. He wanted the knife that he had surrendered to Renee. He needed it, needed to take the edge off. The alcohol had helped but it made it so he couldn’t think. He needed to think. He needed to get control of himself and this fucking situation and he couldn’t if he was dissolving in the tub and every bad thing that had ever happened to him was replaying in his mind and he kept seeing Rain naked and afraid. Blood trickled down his chin and Andrew whimpered. Black spots danced behind his closed eyes and then –

“Andrew?” Aaron’s voice was muffled by the door but his knocking wasn’t. “Dude, did you actually die in there?”

Andrew groaned. His eyes felt glued shut and he was only now registering that the water was no longer warm. He didn’t feel as drunk as before but his body still felt unbearably heavy. How long had he been spiraling, time slipping from him? Fuck, did he actually pass out in the shower?

“I’m fine,” he called back, the lie leaving a bitter taste in his mouth.

“You can’t sleep in the shower,” Aaron replied.

Andrew didn’t bother to say anything. He stretched his foot out and turned off the flow of water. He felt chilled to the core and still so dirty.

“Andrew, don’t make me come in there,” Aaron threatened.

“Oh. Fuck off,” Andrew grumbled. He gripped the side of the tub and pulled himself up, then got to his knees. He braced his palms against the tub and pushed up until he was standing. Vomit surged up his throat and he barely got to the toilet in time.

At some point he stopped being sick. At some point he rinsed his mouth out and brushed his teeth. He dried off and pulled on the briefs, sweatpants, and shirt Aaron had left for him.

When he opened the bathroom door he found Aaron waiting for him outside, sitting with his back to the wall and his hood pulled over his head. Aaron blinked up at him and frowned but didn’t say anything. He clambered to his feet and trailed Andrew back to the bedroom. Andrew didn’t tell him to go away, couldn’t even be bothered. He didn’t know if Renee’s sleep aids were still in his system but he was overwhelmed with exhaustion. He face planted on the bed and curled up around the pillow that smelled the most like Rain. He heard Aaron settling in the beanbag that Andrew had hauled into the room ages ago.

All too soon the room descended into silence. Sleep was coming for Andrew, medically assisted or not, and he couldn’t fight it any longer.

He shut his eyes and saw Rain. He saw Ichirou Moriyama. He didn’t see a way out.

Chapter End Notes

someday we'll get some real fuckin progress, I promise
Thanks for reading! Many things in this AU will remain the same, like Andrew and Kevin's stories, while some things will be different: the Foxes are all on good terms, Seth is alive, etc. What is different is Neil's story. He will remain Rain for the story. His father is still the Butcher and he does have the same pre-runaway history. The rest will be revealed in time!

I'm on tumblr @dkafterdark if you want to check out other stuff I'm writing and posting! I'll tag all related posts with "smoke shop au."

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!