The Cartographer and the World
by crazy_like_a

Summary

Notes
First of all, credit goes to the lovely Nora Sakavic! I will continue to use bits and pieces of post-canon info she gave on her tumblr. I will probably diverge here and there though so bear with me.

Second, I'd like to give you guys a heads up again- there will be explicit sex in this and there will also be unpleasant things like drugs and violence as well. I'll try to put warnings at the beginnings of chapters, but if you see something potentially triggering that I forgot to mention feel free to let me know.

Third, I just started a TFC blog on tumblr! My url is hopingforcoordinates :)
The trip to California went just how Neil expected it to, which was to say it went badly.

Jean had assured Kevin that he was perfectly capable of putting himself on a plane to South Carolina without a "fucking babysitter, Kevin," but Kevin was swept up in another strange surge of compassion for his former teammate. He decided he would fly out and accompany Jean back so that Jean wouldn't be alone. This meant, of course, that Andrew would be going to watch out for Kevin and that Neil would be going to try to make the trip easier for Andrew.

Kevin’s anxiety prevented him from sleeping the night before the trip. His restless shuffling around the suite kept Andrew awake and the knowledge that Andrew was too bothered to sleep kept Neil awake as well. Wymack dropped them off at Upstate Regional before sunrise and they were in the air an hour later.

Neil sat between Kevin and Andrew, but there wasn’t much he could say to help either man. Andrew’s body remained rigid with paralytic fear no matter how many filthy promises Neil muttered with his ever improving Russian vocabulary. Kevin’s leg bounced under his tray table and his nails dug into the sides of his jeans. Neil’s only attempt at talking to him was met with a withering glare.

The two ex-Ravens hadn’t seen each other outside of an Exy court since the few weeks Jean spent recovering at Abby’s house. They’d spoken on the phone a few times, but that was the extent of it. Kevin feared they were too damaged, too sharp, to meet without cutting each other and he spoke sometimes as if he feared their meeting would summon Riko’s ghost.

Neil couldn’t remember why Kevin thought this was a good idea.

When they landed, Neil sat Kevin down on a bench beside the bathrooms with strict instructions to stay put before letting Andrew drag him into the bathroom. It took only a handful of snarled words to get the disheveled businessman in there to leave without fully drying his hands, leaving the two of them alone. Neil said “yes” before he was dragged into a stall and pinned against the door for three minutes. Andrew needed to forget flying and foster homes and Neil needed to forget Jean’s gray eyes and his mother’s white bones buried somewhere along the coast, so they lost themselves in each other for a short while. The kisses were more teeth than tongue, frantic and unfocused, and there was a distinct desperation in the air they shared. Neil twisted his fingers hard into Andrew’s hair and tried to keep quiet while Andrew sucked a fresh bruise just above Neil’s collar and his stubble scraped Neil’s skin deliciously raw.

Kevin scowled at the patches of bright color on Neil’s neck, but the dull threat in Andrew’s eyes kept him quiet. Silently, the three headed out to find Jean.

Out on the sidewalk along the arrivals lane, Jean was standing by a maroon SUV, wearing a USC t-shirt and faded jeans. His face was carefully blank, but Neil recognized the distinct look of someone mentally bracing themselves for something horribly unpleasant. Coach Rhemann looked perfectly at ease behind the wheel and gave Neil a friendly wave when they made eye contact. Andrew didn’t react to the sight of Jean, but Kevin let out a strangled wheeze that betrayed his panic.

“Jean,” Kevin said when they were standing in front of him.

Jean shifted his weight and swallowed hard. “Kevin.”
Neil's skin crawled with heat and the desire to run. He counted the hours until they would be back at the dorms.

Jean sat in the passenger seat while Kevin sat in the middle row behind Coach Rhemann and Neil sat in the back with Andrew. Neil pulled a candy bar out of his pocket and Andrew ate it slowly as the SUV flew down the interstate. Since their flights were a few hours apart, Coach Rhemann had suggested to Kevin that they all come to the USC campus for a tour and a nice lunch. Celebrity Kevin, who had been trained to be charming and agreeable, responded with a level of enthusiasm that had Nicky and Neil rolling their eyes in the other room.

Neil could see that Regular Kevin, who was a mere fly trapped in a tangled web of psychological scarring, was far too sober to deal with whatever Celebrity Kevin had agreed to. Neil sent a text to Nicky saying as much and Nicky replied, lmao poor kev.

“How are you getting along with the Trojans?” Kevin asked quietly in French.

“Things are getting easier,” Jean answered neutrally.

Andrew was still staring blankly at the back of Kevin's head as he said in German, “We could kill both of them and bury them in the sand with your mother.”

Neil snorted. “That sounds better than a whole weekend of this.”

Kevin shot Neil a nasty look over his shoulder even though he didn't understand what they had said. Neil feigned a look of innocence.

It was a shame that Jeremy Knox had graduated that year because his presence alone would have soothed Kevin's frayed nerves. The brief tour of the USC campus and the Trojans' Exy court was nothing short of awkward. A few of Jean's teammates were out and about and they stopped to stare at the trio of Foxes following Jean around.

They ate lunch at a nearby seafood restaurant, where Kevin and Jean's stilted attempts at conversation fell flat. It was a bit difficult to chat about the weather with someone you'd seen broken and bleeding. Neil picked at his breaded shrimp and tried to forget the feeling of Jean's hands on him, holding him down and stitching him back together and scrubbing auburn dye through his hair.

Andrew ordered a brownie topped with ice cream instead of proper food. While he ate careful bites of the gooey dessert, he ignored Kevin's scowl and stared blankly at Jean, who didn't fidget like Neil expected him to. The Raven-made mask of haughty confidence snapped in place over Jean's previously open expression and the pair of them blinked at each other while Kevin twisted his napkin in his lap.

“What do you think of California, Minyard?” Jean asked with a little tilt of his head after ten minutes of frozen silence.

Andrew deadpanned, “Seems less misérables than Evermore.”

Kevin scrubbed a hand over his face and looked longingly at the list of alcoholic beverages wedged between two napkin holders.

Looking at Jean properly for the first time that day, Neil could see that the number on his cheekbone had been covered by a small fleur-de-lis. With its association to French royalty, the tattoo fit in well with the queen piece on Kevin's cheek. They'd buried their king and escaped their castle, but the memory of their brutal monarchy would always hang around them.
The tension between Kevin and Jean was still there when the four of them boarded their flight to South Carolina, but they relaxed enough to speak quietly. Neil and Andrew sat in the row behind them and Neil leaned forward a little to eavesdrop, ignoring the way Andrew shook his head slowly at him. Jean's well-being wasn't his concern, but he was curious nonetheless.

Kevin asked polite questions about the Trojans, Jeremy, and Jean's day-to-day life and Neil would have assumed they were practicing for Kathy Ferdinand's show if he didn't know better. Surprisingly, Jean's tone softened when he spoke of his new team. He admitted to Kevin that they hadn't gotten along at all when Jean first got to USC, but they were doing better after a year. Jeremy still texted him frequently and Neil couldn't tell if Jean welcomed this or not. In his spare time, Jean read novels that weren't required for class, worked his way through a list of movies Laila had compiled, and taught himself to play a secondhand keyboard with online tutorials to guide him. He still practiced hours longer than his teammates, still pushed himself to meet impossibly high standards, but he was learning to exist off the court. He was slowly rebuilding the pieces of his personality that Riko had broken.

Andrew wasn't distracted at all by Kevin and Jean's conversation. Eventually, Neil sat back to speak lowly to him in Russian about what they could do after landing. He rambled on about the Foxes and what they needed to improve before the season started. Over the Midwest, their plane shuddered through a thick summer storm and Neil let Andrew squeeze bruises into his knee while he told him a story about the day he and his mother got stranded on a Kansas highway thanks to a broken serpentine belt in the ancient car they'd bought in Salina.

When it was finally time to disembark, Neil struggled to keep up with Andrew as he fought his way through the crowded aisle. He ignored the indignant squawks from people that fell victim to Andrew's sharp elbows or hard shoves. Wilting with mental exhaustion, Neil stumbled after his goalkeeper and trusted that the other two men would find their way.

They piled into Wymack's car and headed back to the Tower. Neil felt instantly better once he was back on campus. The world was tucked under a blanket of darkening blue while the sun sank into pillows of pink and brilliant orange in the west. A few athletes there for preseason were milling about the sidewalks along Perimeter Road, looking for something to chase away their boredom since downtown was still mostly deserted.

Jean would be staying in their suite over the weekend, sleeping in Nicky's bed while Nicky crashed on Matt's couch. Kevin had been adamant about keeping Jean close while he was in South Carolina, so Neil gave up on trying to convince him Jean would be more comfortable at Abby's.

In the Tower's elevator, Neil rubbed at the scars left by handcuffs and thought about the last time he'd shared a dorm with Jean. Andrew casually reached over and dug his thumb into Neil's wrist, pulling him out of his thoughts. Neil answered the silent reprimand in Andrew's eyes with a shaky smile.

As the elevator doors opened the freshman named Tommy was just stepping out of his dorm. Neil expected the younger man to be interested in Jean and mentally prepared to deal with a biting remark about the Ravens, but instead Tommy gestured to Neil's neck and laughed.

"Damn, Cap, you were only out in Cali for a few hours," Tommy said, grinning. "How'd you find a freak so fast?"

Neil and Andrew stared at him as he disappeared behind the elevator doors.

"Christ," Kevin muttered as he unlocked their suite with his keys. "Fucking embarrassments, all of them."
Jean glanced at Neil's neck as if he hadn't noticed earlier, but said nothing before slipping inside the dorm after Kevin.

“How long do you think it'll take the freshmen to figure it out?” Neil asked.

“Someone will fill them in,” Andrew grumbled. “They need gossip like air.”

Neil nodded and yawned so widely his eyes watered before following Andrew into the dorm. He pulled out his phone on the way to the kitchenette to text Matt.

Back now

Andrew pulled a tub of Neapolitan ice cream out of the freezer and a spoon from the drawer. Kevin and Jean watched him set into the frozen treat with mixed disapproval and horror.

Matt's reply came in less than a minute. U good??

Neil leaned against the wall and typed back, good just tired.

“I can't believe you let him eat that shit,” Kevin hissed in French.

Andrew's eyes snapped up. Locked away in the dorm, it was now painfully clear that he was the only one who didn't speak French and any disadvantage rankled him. Neil could see his already horrible mood getting worse.

In English, Neil said, “Andrew, Kevin has a problem with your diet.”

Kevin fought to hide his look of betrayal. Jean looked increasingly uncomfortable.

Neil was too tired for this.

Matt's next text read, U can crash here if it gets bad. Aaron's out tonight.

Meanwhile, Andrew was slowly but surely eating his way through the strawberry section, a maneuver that never failed to piss Nicky off. Neil could almost hear the argument that would ensue as soon as Nicky returned- “You're supposed to eat the flavors together, you animal! Why do you eat one section at a time? Who does that?”

Neil knocked his head back against the wall and asked, “Dinner?”

Kevin suggested, “We could get subs or something.”

Neil's phone buzzed in his hand with an incoming text from Lizzy.

u seen brian and colby?

Ive been here 2 secs

“Subs sound fine,” Jean said carefully. The tension in the air was stifling.

Lizzy asked, so no?? hows cali btw?

Its still there

take a nap cap u seem a lil grumpy

Neil shook his head and tucked his phone back into his pocket. “Great, so subs? There's a menu in
the drawer, I think.”

Jean's lips pressed into a thin line while Kevin dug through drawers looking for the menu. Neil met Andrew's stare and wished they could just go up to the roof for a couple hours. Kevin found the right menu a few moments later. Neil tore his eyes away from Andrew and fiddled with his phone while Kevin and Jean looked over the options.

“Andrew?” Kevin asked after they made their decisions.

Andrew gave the tub of ice cream a little shake to say he wasn't getting anything.

Kevin rolled his eyes. “You can't have ice cream for dinner.”

“Sure I can.”


Neil answered, “Uh, the roast beef one. No mayo. Make it a foot-long.”

It was Andrew's usual order. Andrew arched an eyebrow at him, unimpressed.

Suddenly, Neil's phone sang Wymack's ringtone. Fishing it out, Neil flipped it open and answered, “Yeah?”

“One of your duties as team captain is to fish your underlings out of that disgusting pond.”

Neil's forehead scrunched. “Who's in the pond?”

“Not sure. I just got a call from Coach Larson that one of ours is going for a swim.”

“Fuck.”

“Have fun with that. I am officially out of fucks to give for the day.”

“Yes, Coach.” He ended the call and tried to weigh the pros and cons of leaving the three other men alone in the kitchen together. Jean had kept more quiet than Neil had expected, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't say the wrong thing to Andrew at some point. Briefly, he thought about texting Lizzy, but she was more likely to jump in the pond with whoever was in there.

“Your teammate is in a pond?” Jean asked with a superior look. “Nice to know the new Foxes are carrying on the tradition of being embarrassing.”

Neil bristled, but Kevin huffed out a small laugh and said, “Swimming in the pond is nothing. Eddie caught a fucking raccoon last month and tried to keep it as a pet.”

“One of the Trojans made pot brownies and forgot to tell people,” Jean said, twisting the hem of his t-shirt. “I'm sure we would've realized sooner if we hadn't been so drunk.”

“You got drunk with the Trojans?” Kevin's disbelief was barely restrained.

Jean lifted a shoulder and looked down at his shoes. “It was graduation. Jeremy wanted one last party with the team. I figured it wouldn't hurt to join in once.”

There was no sense to make of what they'd been through, together and apart, but it seemed like Kevin and Jean were trying anyway. All four of them had survived their own private hells and stumbled out the other side, half-blind from a life in the dark and strangled by paranoia. Fresh air
and freedom still left Neil reeling some days. He felt on some level they could all understand each other if they squinted, but Neil didn't have words for this. Something murky and unpleasant swelled in his throat.

“Um, I need to go deal with—” he held up his phone in lieu of actual words. Neil spun on his heel and strode to the door. He shoved his feet into his shoes before darting out into the hallway and taking a moment to breathe.

When the door opened again, he whirled around in surprise to see Andrew stepping out, wearing his shoes and shoving his keys into his pocket. He had a challenge in his eyes that was soft around the edges.

Neil looked from Andrew to the closed door, thinking of the men behind it. “I thought you'd want to supervise them.”

“They're fine. Birds of a feather and all that.”

Neil stared at his blank expression for a few heartbeats before it occurred to him that maybe he'd been wrong in thinking that Andrew's primary concern that weekend was Kevin.

When he saw that Neil was still confused, Andrew said, “He taught Kevin French. He watched you bleed.”

For a split second he could feel a hard mattress under his back, the ghost of metal around his wrists, a knife digging under his skin, sheets glued to his skin with his own blood. He could feel Jean's gray eyes watching.

“He did what he had to,” he said lowly.

“Watch me not give a fuck.”

“All right,” Neil sighed. He didn't want to talk about this anymore when the memory was prickling the forefront of his mind. “Let's just go to the pond.”

They rode down the elevator in silence and walked together across campus to the pond. Streetlights were beginning to hum to life along the roads and sidewalks. For the most part, Palmetto State's campus was relatively quiet still. Some of the athletic teams had moved into the dorms, but the rest of the student body was still scattered, enjoying the last dregs of summer.

By the glow of nearby streetlights, Neil could see Colby standing at the edge of the pond next to a pair of empty shoes and a Red Wings cap that Neil recognized as Brian's. In jersey shorts and a plain white t-shirt, Colby should have looked like a normal college student, but there was something about his vacant, deep blue stare that made him seem ancient. His distant eyes and his quiet demeanor unsettled just about everyone on the team. No one could tell if he was thinking of nothing or everything.

The surface of the pond moved, but it was impossible to see anyone through the dark water.

“What's Brian doing?” Neil asked.


Colby also had the tendency to be frustratingly vague, but there was no defiance or arrogance in his tone to suggest this was an attitude problem.
“What's he looking for?”

“My camera.”

“Why is it in the water?”

Colby's eyes drifted away from Neil's face. “It was a swimmer.”

“Huh?”

“The one who put it there.”

Neil and Andrew traded a look. The men's swimming and diving team usually stayed away from them—most of the student body avoided the Exy team if they could. Neil couldn't think of a reason for them to mess with Colby of all people. From what Neil had seen, Colby made people feel more confused than confrontational.

“I told him he was pretty and asked if I could take a photograph,” Colby supplied, answering the unasked question. “I don't think he liked that very much.”

Brian resurfaced then, holding something above his head triumphantly. “I found it! Oh, hey, Captain!”

“It's ruined,” murmured Colby, too softly for Brian to hear him, “but he wanted to find it.”

Neil had no idea what these two got up to in their spare time and he felt more certain than ever that he didn't want to know.

“Get out of the pond, Brian!” Neil called.

“Aye, aye!” Brian clambered out of the water, dripping wet with the camera tucked protectively against his chest as if it were a wounded creature. He shot Neil a small smile before handing the waterlogged device to its rightful owner and saying, “Maybe we could get it checked out somewhere? We might be able to get your photos off it.”

Colby shrugged. “It is what it is.”

Neil felt that annoying feeling in his chest that pushed him to reach out to the younger Foxes. It always made him feel awkward, but he still tried. “Colby... maybe we could get the guy to replace your camera. I could talk to the swim team's coach about it if you want.”

“No need, Neil, but thanks. I probably said the wrong words anyway.”

“That guy was just a dick, Colby,” Brian grumbled. “It wasn't your fault.”

“I'm bad with words,” Colby explained to Neil as if this was their first meeting.

Neil nodded once and frowned a little. “Okay, well, you two stay out of trouble- or at least don't get caught next time.”

“Yes, Captain,” the younger men replied.

They followed Neil and Andrew back to the Tower, hanging back out of earshot the entire way, and apparently one of them texted Lizzy because she was waiting at the doors to the lobby. She bumped Neil's fist with her own as she breezed past, shouting to her friends, “What the fuck, guys? You go swimming without me?”
Holly and Jack were in the elevator together when it opened on the ground level. The two of them were pressed against opposite walls with an awkward silence hanging between them. Neil ignored them as they passed and they seemed happy to ignore him as well. Once the doors closed and Neil was alone with Andrew away from prying eyes, he asked, “Yes or no?”

“Yes.”

Neil leaned over to kiss him, needing the warmth and reassurance of the contact, and Andrew pressed up into him greedily. The day had been long for both of them and it was still far from over. His phone buzzed with two new text messages before they pulled apart to step off onto their floor.

“Hey, guys!” said Brook as she swept down the hall toward the stairwell.

Neil grunted in reply. He just wanted to sit somewhere in silence for a few hours and not think about how incredibly surrounded by their teammates they were. Before he and Andrew reached the door to their suite, he stopped Andrew with a hand curved around his elbow.

“Roof?”

Andrew replied, “Food.”

“We could go to that little diner on Main.”

“You're driving.”

“You get to text Kevin, then.”

Andrew sent the text before they made it back onto the elevator. By the time they were sitting in the Maserati and Neil was starting up the engine, the tension in Andrew's shoulders had melted away and the uneasiness in Neil's chest was almost gone. The weekend still promised to be horribly uncomfortable, but the next few hours were theirs.
Even though Kathy Ferdinand had promised to keep the show simple and straightforward, Neil and Kevin agreed it was best that Neil stayed behind just in case Kathy was tempted to pull any tricks again. For Kevin's nerves, there was a bottle of vodka, Andrew with his knives, and Abby with a sedative on hand. He'd almost spilled his first cup of coffee with how badly his hands were shaking and Jean didn't look like he was faring much better.

Wymack dropped off breakfast sandwiches and iced coffee at their dorm before going off to check the bus again. Word about Jean visiting Palmetto State had gotten around and they were all anxious about possible backlash from bitter Ravens fans. Campus security had kept an eye on the Foxhole Court and the team bus, but it wouldn't hurt to be extra careful.

While they ate in the main room of the suite, Neil's phone buzzed almost constantly with texts from the underclassmen.

Lizzy texted, *r u sure we cant go too??*

Brian added, *We made posters n everything man. Let. Us. Live.*

Eddie asked, *Is #3 signing stuff?*

Neil ignored the first two and replied to Eddie, *Give TROJANS stuff to wymack and jean will sign if he feels like it.*
What about my limited edition ravens merch?

Andrew leaned closer to read the message while Neil scowled at his phone. He typed back, *Shove it up your ass.*

Damn.

“Is there a problem?” Jean asked as he wiped the corner of his mouth.

Neil shook his head. “Some of the Foxes want your autograph. I told them to give their stuff to Wymack and you can sign it on the way to the studio if you're up for it.”

One of Jean's eyebrows arched primly. “Are you protecting your Foxes from me or is it the other way around?”

Neil shrugged. Some of the Foxes would press on a wound just to see if it would bleed. Whether it was malice or curiosity, he didn't know and he didn't really care. Kevin and Jean had enough to deal with that day, so he'd try to avoid extra trouble if he could.

“Have you heard from Jack?” Kevin asked.

Jack might have been playing for the Foxes, but he idolized the Ravens. It hadn't escaped Neil's notice when Jack dressed entirely in black for the anniversary of Riko's death.

“No,” Neil answered. “He won't try anything with Andrew around.”

Jack still had scars to remind him to steer clear of Andrew Minyard.

“How nice to have a guard dog,” Jean said in French.

“I wouldn't use French around him,” Neil advised, switching languages as well. “He'll have to guess at what you're saying and you don't want him assuming the worst.”

Kevin sighed heavily and sucked down the last of his coffee while Jean stared at Neil coldly. Andrew watched Jean. They finished their breakfast in silence.

Matt, Nicky, and Aaron showed up when it was time to head over to meet Wymack at the Foxhole Court parking lot. Matt and Nicky had nothing better to do that day and somehow they managed to convince Aaron to join them. Neil knew that Kevin was privately grateful for having the extra back-up. It wasn't exactly a secret that Jean and Kevin had agreed to do an interview and there was bound to be some Ravens fans lurking around there somewhere. According to Nicky, there were already a few press vans sniffing around campus for signs of the two ex-Ravens.

Neil watched them disappear into the stairwell and stepped back into his dorm alone. He tried not to focus on the empty space beside him that Andrew left behind or the heavy silence he was suddenly engulfed in.

It was Saturday, so there was no practice or classes to keep him occupied and he'd promised Andrew that he'd keep to the Tower just in case the press sneaked past campus security looking for drama. With nothing to do, Neil turned the television on just to break the silence and he spent some time tidying up the kitchen and the main room.

He kept his phone close at hand and he was embarrassed at how relieved he was that it chimed every few minutes. All of the messages were from Matt or Nicky and Neil didn't even bother replying to most of them since they came in so fast.
Staring contest Aaron v Jean. He thinks it’s Andrew, said Matt.

Nicky’s message was two seconds behind. y did we let A & A dress the same?? :( poor jean

Coach needs a raise, added Matt.

K’s face is so red!!! 10 bucks says its a stroke

Dan and I have been meaning to ask- how do you tell your boy and his bro apart? Do you have a secret signal or something? They're both in black and I am struggling

not a stroke!! just tipsy

Been awhile since we've had this kind of raven drama. I am having flashbacks.

Neil didn't particularly want to know, so he didn't ask. He wished both of them luck, though, and sent a short message to Andrew that simply read, do I need to bribe you to keep violence to a min?

At noon, Tara lured him over to her dorm with the offer of stir-fry. Neil wasn't in the mood to cook for himself or venture out to the dining hall and he figured he ought to show his face to the younger Foxes at some point. Sheena and Yvonne waved lazily to him from the main room of their suite from their nest of pillows. Some show about zombies was playing on the television in front of them. Tara beamed at him and handed him a plate.

Ever since Andrew pointed out that Tara flirted with him sometimes, it was infinitely more awkward being in her presence. Neil didn't want to encourage her feelings or hurt her, so he steered every conversation toward Exy. It wasn't much work since that's what he did with almost everyone else.

They ate standing up and Neil tried to eat quickly as the conversation began to crumble. Tara shifted her weight and fidgeted with the ends of her long ponytail. She wore lots of jewelry, Neil noted, which always seemed to jangle or clink when she moved.

“So,” she said slowly, lifting two fingers to tap the side of her neck, “I was wondering if you had somebody.”

Neil chewed slowly and swallowed, trying to process what she meant. Then, it occurred to him that she was referring to the hickey he still had from Andrew.

She went on, “They're on the team, I'm assuming? Can you tell me who it is? You never seem to- I mean, you're always with that psycho Minyard.” Tara laughed a little, but Neil was far from amused.

“He's not a 'psycho,’” Neil said slowly, “and you answered your own question.”

Tara tilted her head and scrunched her face a little as she tried to work out the puzzle. Then, the wrinkles in her forehead smoothed out and her jaw dropped. “Oh, it's- you and Andrew? Seriously? Does he even like you?”

“Excuse me?”

Tara put her hands up and tried to backpedal. “You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to. I'm just a bit stunned. Is that really healthy? I mean, you two don't seem particularly happy. You can talk to me about it if you want to. I've had some rough relationships, too, so I totally get it.”
“You really don't,” Neil countered, setting his bowl aside. “I'm not hiding what I have with Andrew. It's just none of your business.”

Tara looked like she'd been slapped. “I didn't mean-”

“Don't worry about it,” Neil said abruptly. “Thanks for lunch, Tara. I'll see you Monday.”

He waved good-bye to Sheena and Yvonne as he headed out of their dorm. As the door clicked shut behind him, he wondered if the food had really been worth the conversation. Tara was not the first person to be a bit baffled by Neil and Andrew's relationship—she wasn't even the first to wonder aloud if it was healthy, but it still left a bad taste in his mouth. Andrew was the only one who could look at every facet of who Neil was without flinching. Neil had handed every piece of himself over to Andrew and trusted he wouldn't drop any.

He returned to the silence of his own dorm. Since no one was there to scowl at him or ask uncomfortable questions, he dug the box containing a pair of padded handcuffs out from under his bunk. Roland gave the box to Neil a few weeks before with a wink and a “Congrats on being team captain.” Andrew had nearly put them through a window when Neil opened the box at the Columbia house later that night, but Neil had convinced him that the cuffs weren't a waste. On his own, he'd been teaching himself how to pick the lock in case he ever wound up in a pair against his will again. The thought of using them with Andrew had crossed his mind a few times, but he understood why Andrew had seethed for the rest of the weekend.

He hadn't gotten the hang of it yet, so he simply held the cuffs in his lap and worked the lock with a bent hairpin. Every now and then, he paused to text Matt and Nicky back. Nicky kept up a running commentary on Kathy, Andrew's mood, and how much booze he wagered Kevin would need afterward. Matt gave him updates on the show itself—apparently, Kathy meant the show to be a tribute to the “lost son of Exy.” Neil was all the more glad that he stayed behind. He wasn't sure he could sit there listening to Kathy wax poetic about poor Riko without putting his fist through a wall.

Slowly, the afternoon drifted by.

At four-thirty, Neil's phone beeped unhappily to signal a low battery. Neil got up off the floor and padded into the bedroom to find his charger, but he froze when he heard muffled yelling and a loud crash through the wall. Lizzy, Brook, and Holly lived next door and they were fairly quiet creatures as long as they were sober.

Neil was halfway through the suite when someone rapped on the door. He jogged the rest of the way to the door and found Holly standing there. As always, her expression was tightly drawn and unreadable, but there was a flash of something akin to panic in her eyes.

“It's Brook,” Holly said. “I think she overdosed.”

Neil darted down the hall and through the open suite door. He followed Lizzy's frantic voice to the bathroom and shoved the door all the way open. It took him a few moments to process what he was seeing. Lizzy was holding Brook's head over the toilet while pulling Brook's long hair away from her face. Brook's shoulders shivered and guttural, choked-off groans punctuated the splatter of vomit.

Lizzy looked over her shoulder at him, ashen and panicked, and said, “She had pills- I don't know where she got them from and I don't know how many she took.”
Neil was vaguely aware of Holly hovering in the doorway behind him while he searched the small room until his eyes caught sight of an orange prescription bottle laying empty in the corner. He picked it up and looked at the label. Brook heaved again. Neil didn't have to guess who she got a bottle of Vicodin from.

“That's it,” Lizzy crooned softly, rubbing Brook's back. “Just get it all out now. You'll be okay.”

“Neil?” Holly asked thinly from behind him.

“Give me a second,” he said. “Lizzy, how long has she been like this?”

“Not long. She was passed out when I found her, but she was breathing.”

Abby had gone with Kevin, Andrew's car was over at the court, and the press vans were no doubt still waiting for some scrap of a story for their evening programs. An ambulance rushing to the Tower was the last thing the team needed.

Neil's mind settled on a plan.

“Holly, get Colby. Tell him we need his car. Lizzy, help me get her up. We're taking her to the ER.”

Holly vanished and Lizzy nodded, already working her arm under Brook's. “Come on, babe. Up we go. That's a good girl.”

Getting a half-conscious Brook from their dorm down into Colby's sedan was a struggle. Thankfully, the elevator and lobby were empty and Neil couldn't see anyone around the Tower's parking lot. Lizzy gathered Brook into her lap in the backseat while Colby started the engine. Neil rode shotgun and didn't bother with a seat belt. He gave Colby quick directions to the hospital and twisted around in his seat to look at Brook. She was grimacing and clammy and the stench of bile clung to her, but Lizzy didn't seem to mind. Lizzy stared back at Neil- not calm, but blank.

Colby drove carefully until Neil snapped at him to speed up. The younger man hunched his shoulders and worried his lip between his teeth as he pressed down on the accelerator.

“So you found her unconscious,” Neil said to Lizzy. He'd heard the initial discovery through the walls and he tried to think of how many minutes had passed already.

Lizzy blinked slowly. “Yeah. She said she was taking a shower, but she was in there for-” Lizzy's eyes flicked up as she tried to remember. “Fuck, I don't know- twenty or thirty minutes? She never washes her hair on Saturdays, so I knew she shouldn't have taken that long. She didn't answer when I called, so I got a bit worried.”

Colby took a turn too hard and Neil braced himself against Colby's headrest to keep from toppling over.

Lizzy stroked the top of Brook's head and blinked back tears.

“How'd you get her to-”

Lizzy wiggled two fingers at him with a hollow smile. A mask if he ever saw one. Neil had more questions, but those could wait.

Colby wrenched the car into the hospital parking lot and followed the signs toward the emergency room. Neil was out of the car before Colby could shift into park and Lizzy was out a second later.
Neil put Brook's arm over his shoulder and half-carried her toward the doors while Lizzy sprinted ahead with the orange bottle clutched in her hand. Colby drove away to find a parking space.

By the time Neil got a half-awake and grumbling Brook inside, Lizzy was gesturing wildly and spouting facts to a nurse behind the desk. The nurse took the orange bottle from her and looked up at Neil with a stern look on her face. A flurry of mint-green scrubs and barked orders later, Brook was out of his hands and on a gurney being wheeled away. Neil blinked at the shiny doors that swung closed after them, blocking his younger teammate from view.

Lizzy took a shaky breath. “I'm gonna go... wash my hands. I'll be back.”

She left. Neil blinked and mechanically walked to the waiting area. He sat in the middle of an empty row of plastic chairs and waited.

Colby walked in and sat beside Neil. A minute later, Lizzy returned and sat on his other side.

Neil could name the emotion appropriate for this situation, but he couldn't find it within himself. Brook's fate was out of his hands now. His heart was settling into its resting rate.

Light wobbled off the keys in Colby's shaking hands. Lizzy was sniffing and blinking back tears. Neil felt nothing beyond mild concern. Curious, he tried pushing at the wall his emotions were bumping into. *Brook took pills. She could've died,* he told himself to see if he'd feel anything. *People die every day,* was his next thought. The empty shelf in his head where his compassion should've been bothered him more than the thought of his teammate lying unconscious somewhere behind those closed doors.

He'd wondered if the parts of his humanity that he'd ditched in order to keep running would come back to him if he stayed still long enough. During the course of his freshman year, he'd let the Foxes in and let them build homes in his heart. He fought to stay and they fought to keep him and he loved them fiercely. Perhaps his heart was too damaged to let anyone else in.

Flinching away from the thought, he took his phone out of his pocket to call Wymack. When he hit the power button, though, the screen remained dark. His battery had run completely out.

“Shit,” he muttered. Calling Wymack was the obvious next step, but it wouldn't do them any good just then. Depending on traffic, which Nicky had complained about more than once, the bus was probably still an hour away at least. The call could wait, he supposed. He wasn't eager to have that conversation.

“Should I call her aunt?” Lizzy asked quietly.

Neil was suddenly aware of the fact that these two were looking to him for guidance. Being relied upon was a strange feeling and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

“You know Brook better than I do. What do you think she'd want?”

Lizzy looked down at her phone. “Teresa's pregnant. I think I should wait until we know more. Panic won't do her or the baby any favors.”

“Hey.” Neil nudged her elbow to get her to look up at him. “You did good today.”

The blank mask cracked and a little bit of Lizzy peered through. “Thanks, Cap,” she said quietly.

Neil turned to the silent, somber boy at his other side. “Colby, you can go back to campus if you want. We'll call Wymack and the guys when they're a bit closer and tell them what's going on.”
Colby bobbed his head slowly before standing. He dipped his fingers through Lizzy's silky black hair as he passed and Lizzy gently touched his elbow in return - the gestures seemed familiar and easy between them.

After the automatic doors closed behind Colby, Lizzy turned back to Neil and stated, “I'm not bulimic.”

Neil kept a neutral expression. “I never said you were.”

“You had a look.”

“I had a look?”

“Yes, you had the 'oh, you're one of those' look, I know that look. I don't like that look.”

“I didn't mean to have that look.”

“You can't fight the look sometimes. I just... I don't want you to go around wondering if I'm throwing up after every meal.”

“So you're not throwing up after every meal? Apparently some of you have problems I'm oblivious to.”

Lizzy's expression darkened. “I didn't know Brook had those pills either. Riley must've left them behind... or given them to her before they broke up.”

“They broke up?”

Lizzy nodded and scratched at the odd triangle of cigarette burns on her cheek. “Yeah, a few weeks ago. Brook's been pretending to be fine.”

“Fooled me,” Neil said wryly. “Has she been using all this time?”

“I don't know,” Lizzy said. “She told me a bit about... her problem, but she swore she hasn't used in years.”

Neil could see the ugly question in his mind reflecting in Lizzy's eyes. They were both wondering if Brook had been counting on waking up or not.

“She hides things sometimes,” Lizzy murmured. “She tries to be happy and see the good in everything, you know. She thinks she has to.”

“Because she survived the car accident,” Neil guessed.

“Everyone told her how lucky she was to be alive. They told her to live life to the fullest and not waste the precious gift she'd been given.”

Neil remembered surviving the vicious attack that had ended his mother's life. He hadn't felt particularly lucky to be alive as he wandered alone down a highway toward San Francisco.

“That's a lot of pressure for a grieving kid,” he murmured.

Lizzy nodded. “I don't know if it's cool that I'm telling you all this. I'm not good with this sort of thing.”

“Me neither.”
A stout woman with curly brown hair pulled into a haphazard bun stepped into the waiting area and called out, “Brook Morales?”

Lizzy shot to her feet and Neil followed slowly. The woman gave them a little smile while she beckoned them over to her. Neil's chest felt empty.

“Is she okay?” Lizzy asked in a small, quivering voice.

The nurse nodded. “She's going to be fine. It looks like the pills didn't have long to work into her system, thankfully. Some activated charcoal and a laxative will help clear the rest from her system.”

Neil said, “She's going to be okay, though?”

“Yes,” the nurse confirmed. “We're going to keep an eye on her for a bit, but she'll be just fine in a day or so.”

“Thank fuck,” Lizzy exhaled. “I'm going to call her aunt.”

Neil watched her back as she walked to the corner to make the call before turning back to the nurse. “I want to see her.”

“This way, please.”

Neil turned and met Lizzy's eyes. She was chewing her thumbnail with the phone pressed to her ear, but she nodded in understanding when Neil gestured to where he was going. She would find her way after the call.

The nurse- Helen, according to her name tag- led him through a set of doors and into a long room with a low ceiling checkered by fluorescent lights. Curtains served as dividers between the beds and Helen led him to where Brook was. She looked small and teary-eyed in her baggy hospital gown. She fidgeted with the thin sheet, unable to meet Neil's eyes.

Neil didn't pay attention to whatever Helen told Brook. She patted Brook's shoulder kindly and then disappeared behind the curtain to attend to someone else.

Neil thought of his first year at Palmetto, when he was stuffed with lies and always looking for the nearest exit, and how the Foxes had his back on and off the court. He thought of Nicky texting him constantly just to get him accustomed to using his phone, Matt waiting up for him in their dorm to make sure he was okay, Allison helping him hide his bruises. His Foxes had held him up instead of letting him drown.

His feelings were still hitting that brick wall, but he wanted to care. He didn't want to walk away from her unaffected by this.

“I guess I took a little more than the recommended dose,” Brook tried to joke. Her voice cracked.

“You're going to be all right.”

“I'm lucky.” Brook forced herself to smile. He could see her lips straining to hold the shape.

“You found a reason to swallow a bottle of pills. I wouldn't call you lucky.”

Brook stared at him and the smile she usually hid behind melted away.

“You've been through a lot of shit,” said Neil. “I don't know everything about you, but I can see
that you're not okay.”

“I'm sorry, Neil. I've been trying, but I'm just- I'm-”

“Brook, stop.” He paused to rifle through the box of words in his brain. He could lie and say he was scared, say he was worried, say he was there for her. Lies crumbled, though, and Neil was tired of building houses on sand. This girl was a Fox, but she'd never be his family like the older Foxes were. Still, he wanted to do right by her as her captain.

Finally, he wet his lips and continued, “You don't owe anybody anything. You don't owe me an apology. You don't owe your happiness to your dead parents. You don't owe your recovery to your aunt or to your teammates. Your life is your own, so you can throw it away on pills if that's what you want or you can get help because you deserve better than this.”

Brook looked away from him with tears clinging stubbornly to her lower lashes. It wasn't until Lizzy came bursting through the curtain that two fat droplets splashed down Brook's cheeks.

“Hey, kid!” Lizzy said, beaming. She didn't hesitate in perching on the side of the bed and pulling Brook into a hug. “Glad to see you're awake and stuff.”

“Lizzy, I-”

Lizzy only held her tighter and rocked back and forth gently. “You scared the shit out of me. I shoved my fingers down your throat. Call it even?”

Neil didn't know how Lizzy was chuckling at the moment, but it seemed to clear the storm from Brook's face. She turned into Lizzy's hair and smiled a little.

“Yeah, we'll call it even, I guess.”

“Good.” Lizzy pulled back and put her hands on Brook's shoulders. Affecting an exaggerated Midwestern accent, she said, “This gown is simply all wrong, darlin'. I mean, the color is fine for a breath mint, but it won't win you that crown. Why, I wouldn't be caught dead in this old thing at Wal-Mart on a Wednesday.”

Brook rolled her eyes. “A beauty queen and a drama queen? Such talent.”

“Puh-lease, sweet pea, any woman worth her salt knows how to be both and more.” Lizzy looked over her shoulder at Neil and dropped the accent. “I called Coach, but he didn't answer. I guess he's driving or something, so I sent a text to Abby.”

“Thanks, Lizzy. I'm going to- I'll be outside.”

Numbly, he walked back out to the waiting room. Brook would be fine, but he knew it could have easily been much worse. Brook was a better liar than he gave her credit for and perhaps he'd gotten rusty at detecting it.

He looked around at the nurses bustling around behind the desk and the rumpled man sitting in the waiting room, alone and fearful. He looked through the doors at the sunny world outside.

Neil continued forward out onto the sidewalk. He walked along the curb and sank onto a metal bench, sucking in deep lungfuls of fresh air. Shimmering whorls of heat peeled off the asphalt. The air in front of the cars shivered. Neil craved the smell of cigarette smoke and the feeling of the stick between his fingers. He craved Andrew's unwavering presence at his side.
At first, he thought wishful thinking produced the image of a black Maserati swinging sharply into the parking lot and pulling crookedly into a space near the lot entrance, but after he blinked it was still there.

His heart dropped like a stone. Andrew.

He sprang to his feet but got stuck there, frozen by panic, as he watched sunlight flash off blond hair. It was less than a minute until Andrew was there in front of him, hands twisting into his collar and mouth snarling.

“What the fuck, Neil?”

“You're back early,” Neil said dumbly.

“No shit,” Andrew spat, shaking him harshly. “I had to find out from that motherfucking flower child. 'Neil's still in the hospital,' he said. 'Didn't get the chance to call for help.'”

Neil winced. Colby really was terrible with words. He wrapped his hands around Andrew's wrists and tried to think of something that would ease his rage. Peripherally, he saw Wymack's car pull into the lot as well.

“My phone died.”

“I'll bury it with you then,” Andrew growled.

“Lizzy texted Abby,” Neil figured they were already back at the Tower and in a panic when Lizzy's text went through. “I'm sorry. I thought you weren't going to be back until later. Nicky said traffic was really bad.”

Andrew shoved him away and Neil stumbled for a second before catching his footing. He could see Wymack crossing the lot like a storm rolling in. Matt wasn't far behind him.

Andrew popped him sharply on the forehead. “Payphones are things that exist, you know.”

“Neil!” Matt shouted. “You all right?”

Neil waved a hand lamely and waited until Wymack and Matt were standing at Andrew's side. Wymack snapped at Andrew for “taking off like an idiot” while Matt clapped his hands on Neil's shoulders and looked him over for signs of injury.

“Brook overdosed on Vicodin,” Neil explained. He only wanted to tell this story once. “Lizzy found her in the bathroom unconscious and got her to throw up and then we brought her here. Brook's fine now. They're going to keep her here for a bit to make sure. My phone was low on battery and it died on the way here. I didn't expect you guys back for awhile, so that's why I waited to call.”

Wymack was frowning deeply at him with his arms crossed over his chest. He looked like he was fighting very hard to keep hold of his anger.

“ Damn,” Matt sighed, running a hand through his hair and messing up his spikes.

Andrew was still struggling to slow his breathing while his eyes flashed dangerously.

“You didn't think to call an ambulance?” Wymack asked gruffly.

“Brook was breathing and sort of awake. I didn't want the press getting hold of this. We don't need
this kind of story getting out a few weeks before the season starts.”

Matt ran a hand over his face, muttering, “Talk about cold logic.”

“She's okay, though?”

Neil looked back to Wymack and nodded. “She's up and talking. They gave her some charcoal and stuff to get the rest of the drugs out of her system. Lizzy's in there with her- I could take you to her, if you want.”

Wymack held up a hand. “I'll find 'em. Jesus, what a mess.”

Neil watched him walk inside, feeling both relieved that he was there to take the reigns and sick with guilt all over again. He couldn't tell if the disappointment he'd seen in Wymack's eyes was real or imagined.

“Colby scared the hell out of us, man,” Matt told him. “He just kept saying that you were here and that we needed to get you.”

Andrew balled his fists and his knuckles went white.

“Yeah, he's... awkward,” Neil mumbled. “Sorry about all this.”

“No worries. Just glad everyone's okay. I'm going to, uh, go find Wymack,” Matt said, flicking a look between the two shorter men.

After he disappeared inside as well, Andrew took a step closer to invade Neil's space. He jabbed a finger hard into Neil's chest and said, “Don't ever fucking pull this shit again.”

Neil could feel that Andrew's hand was shaking. “Sorry for scaring you.”

“I should just kill you myself. Let the media have that story instead.”

Neil's shoulders slumped. The fight leached out of him at once, leaving him drained and heavy. His faults piled up at once. He didn't know what was going on with the younger Foxes. He put the team's reputation ahead of Brook's life. He failed to contact Wymack and Andrew.

Andrew rolled his eyes and shoved Neil's shoulder. “Stop that.”

“I'm not good at this. I don't know shit about any of them.” Neil dragged a hand through his hair.

“You're their captain, not their parole officer.”

Neil nodded, but he was still dripping with cold shame.

“Why didn't you call Bee?”

Neil winced and rubbed at his eyes. He'd forgotten all about Betsy. Another mistake on the growing pile.

“Come on,” Andrew said, tugging at Neil's wrist. “We're going to Columbia for the night.”

“Was Kevin that bad today?”

Andrew gave him a sharp look and Neil didn't ask any more questions. Once they were in the Maserati, he took out the charger from the glove compartment and plugged his phone in.
Chapter End Notes

I'm probably not going to be able to reply to every comment (I'm really sorry about that!) but I want you all to know that I honestly appreciate you guys so much. Thank you for taking the time to read and thanks for leaving kudos or comments. It really means a lot to me. You guys are so wonderful and I hope you enjoyed the chapter <3
Neil and the Foxes deal with a rough start to the season and a tough loss.

Hey guys! Explicit sex stuff in this chapter so be warned

With Neil as their new captain, the Foxes lost the first three games of the season. The first game had been close, the second had been a fumbling mess, but the third was humiliating and the third was the most important. The third game was a home game against Edgar Allan. The Ravens crushed the Foxes on their own court and the final buzzer was like a bucket of ice water over Neil's head.

He tried not to think the words “losing streak” as he gave polite answers to the reporters. He tried not to worry that the Foxes' best days were over as he methodically stripped out of his gear. He tried not to remember that failing at Exy could cost him his life as he met Kevin's eyes across the locker room.

Kevin looked as defeated as Neil felt. Both men were quiet as they changed out and Neil found he preferred the harsh insults slung in French. He wanted Kevin to yell at him, criticize him, piss him off. Neil was the captain and he should have led the team better, but he couldn't pinpoint where exactly he went wrong. He needed someone to throw his mistakes in his face so he could see them, but no one did. Kevin simply shuffled off to the showers without a word.

Nicky and Aaron were weirdly quiet. Matt clapped Neil on the shoulder and mumbled something that might have sounded encouraging if Neil's ears hadn't been stuffed with the memory of the final buzzer. Jack and Joel were both sullen, ignoring each other in the locker room as well as they'd ignored each other on the court. The younger men in the room didn't look his way at all before drifting off to shower as well.

Andrew's face was a perfectly smooth display of genuine indifference even though he'd guarded the goal with a rarely seen ferocity. At half-time, Andrew had come off the court dripping with sweat and struggling for breath. At the end, his lip had curled into a snarl as the stadium filled with the triumphant howling of the Ravens and their fans.

Neil had managed to score five points and earned at least twice as many bruises. His pride was in tatters and his head was full of static that prevented him from seeing his way out of this. The horrible notion of the Foxes not making it to spring championships that year stole the air from his lungs. He could taste failure like bile rising in his throat.

He didn't remember getting into the showers and he didn't remember whether he washed his hair or not. The water turning frigid against his shoulders startled him out of his thoughts. He angrily swatted at the knob to cut the spray off and toweled off, shivering.
The others were gone by the time Neil shuffled out in baggy sweats and a t-shirt. Only Andrew remained, straddling a bench in the locker room with a disdainful frown tugging at one corner of his mouth. Neil prickled with shame all over again and swallowed thickly as he stood there staring back at him.

Andrew got to his feet and picked up his bag while Neil dumped his dirty uniform in the basket. Then, they headed out to the Maserati together. The crowd was deafening across the parking lot, still pouring from the stadium doors in a sea of black. Neil folded his sore body into the passenger seat and tipped his forehead against the cold window, trying to find the quickest escape route out of the swamp in his mind.

Nicky's voice floated up from the backseat. “We'll get 'em next time, Neil.”

“I doubt the Moriyamas are impressed,” said Aaron, who was only there because Katelyn and the Vixens were having a girls' night.

Neil rolled his eyes, an instinctive response to most things that came out of Aaron's mouth, while Nicky hissed, “Jesus, Aaron.”

Andrew started the engine and reversed out of the space.

“It's not like he doesn't know,” Aaron argued back. “No one wants a dancing monkey that won't dance.”

Surprisingly, it was Kevin's voice that came next. “Shut the fuck up, Aaron. No one asked you.”

Neil clenched his eyes shut and tried not to feel the weight of Ichirou's coal eyes. Losing three games wasn't enough to diminish his potential worth, but some anxious little voice whispered, *What if we never win again? What if the glory days are over already? Run run run.*

“The team's still finding their groove,” said Nicky after an awkward stretch of silence. “Neil, seriously, this is nothing to worry about.”

“You don't need to baby him, Nicky,” Kevin snapped.

Neil's phone chimed with a text from Wymack. *Dont you dare do that martyr shit. This isnt on you.*

“Fuck's sake, Kevin, it's called being nice. It's something humans do.”

“I'm fine, Nicky,” Neil answered, earning a disgusted “ugh” from someone. He couldn't tell who.

Dan texted, *tough game kid u win some/lose some*

Neil swallowed hard and squinted at the words, looking for evidence of disappointment. He was supposed to be taking care of the team she fought so hard for and he'd proven himself a consistent failure.

A text from Matt came next. *Breakfast tomorrow?*

Neil texted “sure” to Matt and “thanks” to Wymack and Dan before putting his phone on silent and stuffing it in his pocket.

At the Tower, they fell out of the Maserati and ambled to the elevator together to ride up to their floor in silence. The other Foxes were wandering through the hallway between their dorms, some were looking for something to do and some were already well on their way to being drunk. Matt
leaned out of his door and lifted a bottle of vodka in offering to the five men stepping off the elevator. Kevin, Nicky, and Aaron headed straight for him. On a night like this, a bottle of booze was enough to buy a brief friendship. Neil gave Matt a half-hearted wave, but followed Andrew into their dorm.

Neil stood in the middle of the main room and zoned out for a few seconds, still caught in the fog of self-doubt and self-loathing. What the hell went wrong? Lizzy and Nicky weren't communicating well on the court. Holly had gotten red-carded for an outburst almost as soon as the second half started. Colby's new meds messed with his ability to focus. Joel was slow to recover from getting checked. Tommy had shown up smelling like beer that night. Brian still wasn't able to react fast enough when his mark did something unexpected. The majority of the Foxes were new and mostly amateurish while the Ravens had sent out all their senior players.

Logically, Neil knew that he and the rest of the older Foxes could play full games. They had played full games and won in the past, but the underclassmen needed time on the court to learn. That meant the Foxes would falter, but hopefully they would grow. Neil knew this, but it didn't do anything but tighten the knot of worry in his stomach.

Andrew stepped out of the bathroom, dressed for bed. “The game's over, Neil.”

Neil snapped back to the present and looked over at him, but Andrew didn't wait for a reply. He turned and disappeared into the dark bedroom. Frowning a little, Neil went into the bathroom to wash up for bed.

After he'd brushed his teeth, he checked his phone again and found new messages waiting in his inbox.

It's strange watching you guys play without me! said Renee. Tonight was a tough loss, but don't take it too hard, Neil.

From Allison there was a warning: You guys better kick raven ass in the spring or I'll come back and do it for you.

Neil told himself he'd reply to them in the morning. They'd understand. On his way to the bedroom, he decided to leave the lights on in the main room so Nicky and Kevin wouldn't crash into the walls when they came back.

There'd been a brief flicker of hope for something physical, but he didn't feel all that surprised when he found that the bedroom lights were off and Andrew was already in bed. Kisses and sex weren't things to be earned with them, were never given as rewards or withheld as punishment, but he still felt horribly undeserving that night.

“You're so slow,” Andrew grumbled suddenly.

Neil froze halfway to his bunk. “Sorry?”

“Whatever, just get your ass up here.”

He tilted his head and squinted into the darkness. He could just barely see Andrew's hand hanging over the side of his bed.

“You want-?”

“If it's yes tonight, come here,” Andrew growled, crooking two pale fingers.
Neil had his hands on the ladder a second later. For all the times they'd fooled around in the dorm, they'd never done so in Andrew's bunk. When the mattress dipped under the press of his knee, Andrew's hand clamped onto Neil's shoulder and hauled him forward. Neil had just enough of his wits about him to make sure he braced himself on his elbows instead of collapsing onto Andrew's chest.

Andrew dug his fingers into Neil's hair and pulled their mouths together in a bruising kiss. He licked a groan out of Neil's mouth with a hard, slow push of his tongue and tugged at the back of Neil's shirt with his free hand.

Careful not to put his weight on Andrew, Neil shifted to straddle Andrew's hips and slid his hands under Andrew's shoulders. His body ached from the night's game, but arousal and relief at having Andrew's lips pressed to his propped him up on a temporary high. His anxiety and self-loathing were pushed out of focus by Andrew's teeth scraping over his bottom lip and Andrew's hands squeezing his ass.

“You were so good tonight,” Neil gasped into his mouth, resting his forehead on Andrew's. “That shot from Lennette that you blocked was fucking gorgeous. She was so pissed.”

Andrew nipped at Neil's earlobe. “If you're going to talk about Exy, you can go hump your racquet instead.”

“Shut up,” Neil huffed. “I'm trying to give you a compliment.”

“I don't care.” In the small amount of space, Andrew flipped them expertly and wasted no time in grinding his hips down into Neil's. He found Neil's mouth again and kissed him roughly.

Neil's energy was waning fast, but he wanted this. He wanted to shove the ugly feelings cramming together in his rib cage and just focus on this. Andrew seemed to sense it, too, because their kisses took on a quality that bordered on desperation. Andrew's tongue curled hotly in Neil's mouth, his hand slipped under the hem of Neil's shirt, his hips rolled down in a way that reminded Neil of that hotel room in Birmingham and how it felt to have those hips moving between his thighs. All of Neil's focus zeroed in on Andrew's growing erection pressing into his hip. His arms felt close to boneless, so a hand job was out of the question. He wanted sex. He wanted to narrow his entire world down to this mattress. He wanted Andrew's first memory of him in his bunk to be a damn good one.

Neil meant to ask if Andrew wanted to get off, but what came out instead was, “Fuck my mouth.”

Andrew pulled back, panting.

“Andrew? Yes or no?”

Andrew sank his teeth into Neil's neck, sealing his lips slowly around the area and sucking just hard enough to tempt the skin to bruise. Then, he mumbled, “Yes, but don't fall asleep with my dick in your mouth.”

Neil chuckled and smoothed a hand over Andrew's hair. “I'll stay awake if you will.”

They move around in the dark so that Neil was scrunched halfway down the mattress with his face in line with Andrew's groin. The game had left them heavy and sluggish, but they knew how to run on fumes. Andrew's knees were spread and his arms were curled under his pillow. Carefully, with at least two more affirmations of consent, Neil pulled Andrew's flannel pants and boxers down past his swollen erection.
There was a bit of fumbling before Andrew could thrust down smoothly into Neil's mouth and it took a few tries before Andrew figured out how deeply he could thrust without Neil gagging around the head of his cock. They hadn't perfected this particular dance yet, but they'd been practicing.

“Neil,” Andrew prompted.

Neil hummed sleepily as Andrew pulled almost all the way out. He knew what Andrew wanted—they'd agreed over the summer that two quick taps anywhere on Andrew's body would bring this all to a halt if Neil needed to stop or take a break. Neil curved his hands around the shivering, solid thighs bracketing his shoulders and squeezed a little to signal that his answer was still yes.

Andrew slowly pressed back in and Neil exhaled through his nose slowly, relishing in the comfortable press of the mattress at his back and the feeling of being filled by the man above him. He hollowed his cheeks and sucked wetly as Andrew relearned his rhythm. A little grunt fell out of Andrew's mouth into his pillow and Neil groaned in response.

After doing this a handful of times, Neil knew how to slide his tongue just so to make Andrew's hips stutter and how to relax his throat to take Andrew in a little deeper. Neil's mind went hazy and his body moved on pure instinct. Neil stroked his thighs and lifted his head to meet his thrusts, greedily pulling him in. His own arousal was stirring, but the heat was still soft enough to come back from. There was only Andrew, the taste of salty musk in his mouth, and the soft pull of sleep darkening the edges of his mind.

“Neil,” Andrew warned through clenched teeth.

Neil tightened his grip on Andrew's thighs, which meant stay. Andrew's hips jerked downward, shaking with restraint, and his cock swelled two seconds before he spilled onto the back of Neil's tongue. Moaning quietly, Neil coaxed him through the aftershocks and reached up to squeeze his hips as he came down. Then, Andrew withdrew slowly to tuck himself back into his boxers. He tipped over to lay on his side while Neil caught his breath.

For a moment, Neil was so relaxed, so satisfied by Andrew's satisfaction, that he thought he might actually fall asleep right there. His mind went hazy and blank before Andrew's hand smacked his shoulder. It took Neil a moment to register that his hand was wrapped around a plastic water bottle.

“Drink if you're not going to get up for mouth wash.”

Neil smirked at how breathless Andrew sounded as he took the bottle from him, letting his fingers slide heavily over Andrew's. He sat up to gulp down half the bottle, washing down the taste of Andrew's cum.

“They'll be too drunk to notice if you sleep here,” Andrew murmured into his pillow.

Neil took another drink of water and screwed the cap back on. “You have to say the actual words if you want me to sleep with you.”

“I don't trust you not to break your neck on your way down.”

“I'm fine,” Neil said, pressing the water bottle back into Andrew's hand. Andrew shoved it back into its resting place between the mattress and the wall.

When Neil moved toward the ladder, Andrew's voice stopped him. “Just stay, moron, and don't breathe on me because your mouth is going to smell like roadkill in July.”
Neil scowled in his direction, unable to actually see him. “You're welcome for the blow job, by the way.”

“The fuck do you want? A parade?”

Rolling his eyes, Neil scooted back until he could rest his head on the other half of Andrew's pillow. He twisted around so that Andrew could yank the blanket out from under him and cover them both with it.

“Are you hard?” Andrew asked.


That, among other things, would be dealt with later. Neil turned his face into Andrew's pillow, nuzzling into Andrew's scent, and fell asleep.
The Morning After

Chapter Summary

The morning after the game against the Ravens, Neil finds his way out of a low point with some help.

On Saturday, Neil woke up hating himself. Partly because he could still hear the roar of the black-clad crowd after the Foxes' brutal loss the night before and partly because he hadn't brushed his teeth after blowing Andrew. His mouth tasted like something died there. On the other side of the room, Nicky and Kevin were snoring heavily, still sleeping off the alcohol they'd packed away. They'd stumbled in around three and startled both Neil and Andrew awake. Nicky hadn't even made it up into his bed- he fell asleep at the bottom of the ladder with one arm curled around a rung.

Andrew's eyes cracked open as Neil fished his phone out from under the pillow to check the time. It wasn't even five yet. Neil's mind was begging for the sweet emptiness of sleep, but his body was already awake and itching for a run. Since the school year had started and Kevin had resumed late night practices, Neil hadn't been running as often in the morning and he missed having that bit of time to himself.

He'd agreed to have breakfast with Matt that morning, but Matt would be undoubtedly hungover so breakfast wouldn't happen for hours. A morning run sounded better and better until Neil sat up. He felt like someone had filled his joints with concrete and replaced his muscles with cotton. Bruises throbbed everywhere- parting gifts from the Ravens- and a headache was already brewing behind his eyes. He was hard, too, but that was easily ignored as he maneuvered his aching body down the ladder.

Neil padded across the hall to the bathroom and left the door unlocked in case Andrew decided to get up. He scrubbed the awful taste out of his mouth with a generous glob of toothpaste. Then, he stripped and took a moment to study his injuries in the mirror. An elbow that hit him at just the right angle left a dark bruise along his jaw. A large patch of purple, speckled with crimson, curved over his shoulder. Yellowish green spread across his right hip. A few oblong stretches of blackish purple with vague, green borders marked his arms, shins, and one particularly fat one went across his outer thigh.

The doorknob turned without the accompaniment of a knock, which meant it was Andrew. Neil dropped his hands to his sides and watched as he stepped in, squinting against the light and trying to glare at the same time. He paused for a moment when he noticed that Neil was naked and then he slowly shut the door behind him.

“You're up early,” Neil deadpanned, knowing full well it was his fault Andrew was awake at all.

“Fuck you.”

“If you want.” Neil smirked and Andrew retaliated by flicking the bruise on his arm. Neil clapped a protective hand over it, muttering, “Asshole.”

“Still having fun, junkie?” Andrew leaned his hip against the counter and folded his arms over his
chest as he studied Neil's bare and battered form.

The memory of last night's game sobered him and sent anxiety skittering through his chest.

Andrew rolled his eyes and stifled a yawn. “You can cry on Matt's shoulder later. Get in the shower.”

When Neil turned to reach for the shower curtain, Andrew leaned forward just enough to trail his fingertips over Neil's hip. Goosebumps rose across his skin and Andrew's eyes softened at the corners with a hint of a smug smirk.

Neil cut the water on and waited for it to heat up before he stepped beneath the spray. For a few moments, he let the water beat against his stiff shoulders and then he squeezed some shampoo into his palm. The toilet lid clanked against the cistern. Neil washed his hair while Andrew relieved himself and, when Andrew grunted his name, Neil stepped out of the spray to avoid getting scalded as the toilet flushed. Andrew washed his hands and brushed his teeth in one go, which caused the water pressure in the shower to wilt while Neil tried to rinse the rest of the suds from his hair.

Neil didn't have to look or hear anything to know that Andrew would take up his electric shaver next to get rid of his pale stubble. Andrew had started shaving more regularly ever since Nicky had teased Neil about the reddening patches of beard burn on his neck—“Where else are you a bit pink, I wonder?"

Mornings like this made Neil feel settled. For now, it was just the two of them going about their morning. For now, he was just Neil. It was easy and comfortable in a way that settled the rumbling in his mind.

The curtain pulled back with a spill of cool air and Andrew climbed in behind him. Neil bit back a smile and quickly finished rinsing the soap off his legs. He started to move in order to switch places with Andrew, but Andrew stopped him with a firm hand on his chest.

Andrew quirked an eyebrow— a question. Neil dropped his gaze meaningfully to Andrew's mouth— an answer.

His eyes fell closed when Andrew leaned forward and kissed him. The kiss was soft at first since Andrew was still shaking off sleep, but it quickly turned heated. Neil could sense Andrew's yes or no? in the small moments of hesitation, his searching stare, his bated breath. He was willing to trust Neil's promise to say no, but not asking the question aloud only made him more vigilant in his hunt for clear signals. Neil told him yes with eager kisses and soft eyes, with hands clutching at Andrew's hair, with low appreciative sounds. Andrew's hands grew bolder the more Neil responded. Andrew's fingers raked across his lower back, reached down to squeeze his ass. Andrew ducked to one side to stamp rough kisses down the column of Neil's throat.

Neil whispered, “Can I touch you?”

“Above the hips,” Andrew mumbled back before biting Neil's shoulder.

Neil let out a quiet moan and scratched soft lines down Andrew's neck to his chest, groping at the hard muscles there and lightly pinching his nipples. He was content with exploring hands and hot kisses, willing to ignore the tightening heat in his groin, but Andrew had other ideas. One of his hands left Neil's skin completely and the absence of it drew Neil's attention downward. Andrew's fingers were reaching for his dick, but stopped halfway there.
Neil glanced up and saw the tension in Andrew's expression. With a kiss to his jaw, Neil murmured, “Yes.”

Just as Andrew wrapped his hand around Neil's aching erection, three sharp knocks interrupted them. Andrew froze, but he didn't move his hand. Neil frowned at the curtain and listened hard. A few seconds later, three more knocks came followed by a high-pitched whine.

“Neeeeeeiiiiil! I have to peeeeee.”

Neil cleared his throat, distracted by Andrew squeezing him. “Uh, um, I'm in the shower, Nicky!”

“Come on, Neil,” Nicky groaned, thumping his head against the door. “I'm still drunk and the whole world is sideways and I really don't wanna piss on the floor because Kevin will kill me and I really can't die before Erik makes an honest man outta me- oh, the door's unlocked. Thanks, bro.”

“Nicky, I really-” Neil's tongue was uncooperative. The door swung open and shut. “Andrew's-”

“Oh, pfft, Andrew won't be up for ages,” Nicky said, laughing drunkenly as he knocked a bottle off the counter. Then, he stopped short and gasped. “Fuck, don't tell him I came in here when you were all wet and naked. He would murder me.”

Andrew looked ready to do just that. His fingers twitched against Neil's waist and tightened subtly around his dick. Neil pressed his lips into a thin line as panic spiked in his chest.

Nicky remained blissfully unaware of his cousin's presence and his anger as he stumbled into the wall. “Oop, fuck, I better sit down for this. Can't balance for shit while I'm drunk. Am I drunk? I feel drunk. I hate waking up still drunk. Ugh, Matt had so many bottles of stuff. He's so nice and so pretty. Have you noticed how pretty he is? Not that he's prettier than you! Ooh, don't tell Andrew I said that. Neil, promise!”

“I promise I won't tell Andrew you think I'm pretty,” Neil said flatly. Andrew scowled. “Gooooood.” Then, Nicky proceeded to fall into the toilet and cried, “Aww, you left the seat up! Not cool, man. My ass is all wet and not in the fun way, if ya know what I mean.” Nicky dissolved into a fit of giggles at his own joke.

Andrew finally let go of Neil's waning erection, but he didn't move away or open his mouth to let his cousin know he was there. Neil didn't know what to do. I can't wait until we have our own place. The thought curled warmly in his heart. Neil leaned in for a quick kiss, which Andrew returned even with the annoyance flickering in his gaze.

“Neil, did you wear all these clothes to bed?” Nicky's voice made Neil flinch away from Andrew's mouth. “We can turn the heat up if you're getting too chilly at night. I'd offer to snuggle- you really seem like you could use it- but I don't think Andrew would like me getting too close. Columbia was so long ago and I've been good since! I think I'm- I've been a good friend and I've learned my lessons, but nope. One strike and I'm out. Andrew would be the harshest baseball player ever.”

Neil rubbed at his eyes and shook his head. “You almost done, Nicky?”

“Oh! I am done. Ha, I didn't notice. Okay, Neil, I'm gonna flush so take a step to the- wherever the water isn't.”

Stepping forward would put him right up against Andrew and Andrew had only wanted to touched above his hips, so Neil reached back and tilted the shower head down. The spray still hit the back of his ankles, but Neil had dealt with worse than hot water. It's just for a few seconds. It's not a big

Andrew wrapped his arms around Neil's waist and tugged him forward. He took a half-step backward and one of Neil's hands shot out to brace against the tiled wall in case they slipped; the other came up to cradle the back of Andrew's head. The bruises littering his front throbbed from being pressed so tightly to Andrew's hard body. “Above the hips.” Neil pulled against Andrew's grip and tried to put the customary gap between them, but Andrew kept his arms locked, gathering him as close as he could manage. Then, Neil felt a firm kiss against his hammering pulse point, felt fingers digging possessively into his back, and understood Andrew's silent but clear stay.

Even without his morning dose of caffeine, Neil's awareness was razor-sharp.

Andrew's heartbeat against his chest. The swell of his stomach as he breathed deeply. Andrew's cheekbone against Neil's unshaven jaw. His toes poking the soft arch of Neil's foot. The twitch of Neil's cock against Andrew's hip. Their damp thighs pressed together. A slow exhale slipping between soft lips against the side of Neil's neck.

There were entire lifetimes in the few seconds they held onto each other.

Nicky washed his hands and called out a good-bye to Neil before slamming the door shut behind him.

Neil stuffed down the sharp burst of wanting in his veins and stepped back as soon as the water returned to a comfortable temperature. Andrew's eyes were calm and, to Neil's dizzying relief, Andrew was still present behind them.

“Does he do that often?” Andrew's even tone betrayed nothing.

“That's the first time that happened,” Neil answered. “Someone forgot to lock the door.”

Annoyance flashed.

“Were you distracted by something?” Neil asked coyly.

“Shut up.”

Neil chuckled and swooped in for a quick kiss. “You wanna wash up? I can leave if that'll help you focus.”

Andrew got down on his knees instead and Neil forgot what he'd been teasing him about. He stiffened again quickly on Andrew's tongue and in just a few minutes he was shuddering through an orgasm with Andrew's name buried in the gasps falling from his lips.

The next few hours were quiet. Nicky and Kevin slept on, their snores and sleepy murmurings leaked through the door. Outside the suite, the hallway remained quiet. If Neil was to guess, he'd say most of his teammates had spent the night drinking to forget the loss against Edgar Allan. Neil and Andrew shared coffee in the kitchen before going up to the roof to share cigarettes. There was a chill in the air and worries weighing on Neil's mind, but he did his best to keep the unpleasant thoughts from souring his morning. He texted Allison and Renee back with short messages that didn't invite any further conversation. He didn't want to talk about the Ravens game with them just yet. He didn't want to focus on how wrong the court felt without them on it and how Dan would've handled the new Foxes better.
At nine-thirty, Matt sent Neil a half-coherent message saying that he desperately needed food, so Neil crept into the bedroom to put on jeans, his armbands, and a fresh t-shirt before meeting Matt by the elevator. Matt looked rougher than Neil had expected. His jaw was covered in scruff, his eyes were bloodshot and bleary, and his hair was unwashed and sticking up in wayward tufts. Neil was just thankful Matt had brushed his teeth.

“Morning,” Neil said slowly.

“Bugh,” Matt groaned, rubbing at his eyes. “How does Kevin drink so much? Where does it go?”


The elevator arrived and the doors slid open with a ding that made Matt flinch. They shared the elevator with a few football players that were obviously excited about that night's game. Matt backed into the corner and pressed his hands to head, breathing slowly through his nose while the other athletes laughed and shoved at each other. Neil watched the numbers on the display as they descended to the ground floor and tried not to get hit by a stray elbow.

In the parking lot, Matt handed over the keys to his truck without a fight and whined pathetically as he folded his large frame into the passenger seat. Silently, Neil drove them to the little diner downtown that served Andrew's favorite waffles. He parked by the door and stifled his laughter as Matt put on an over-sized pair of sunglasses that Neil recognized as Allison's. In the huge dark frames, Matt looked vaguely insect-like, but still completely miserable.

“Fucking sun,” Matt grumbled as they headed inside.

They claimed an empty booth in the back corner near the restrooms. Neil picked up a menu even though he knew exactly what was on it and Matt took out his phone to check for new messages. Finding none, Matt laid his head down on the sticky Formica table beside his phone and grunted something about never drinking again.

Neil stole the phone and posted a photo of Matt's pathetic state to the group chat between Matt and the girls with a message that said, I'm not cleaning this mess up.

Dan responded instantly, my poor bby pls feed him some carbs neil

Allison said, Weak.

To which Dan replied, r thos ur glsses alli

Neil squinted at her message and typed back, Please dont coach those kids on their spelling

Allison's text arrived as soon as his sent. He won those fair and square when you were interviewing for your job, Dan.

A stout middle-aged waitress named Martha arrived with two cups of coffee, two glasses of water, and a knowing look.

“What'll it be, boys?” she asked.

Matt whimpered against the table. “Just end me, Martha.”

In Neil's hand, Matt's phone chimed with a new message.

“You want your pancakes or a breakfast wrap?” asked Martha.
“I need bacon,” Matt answered. “Lots of bacon.”

“Breakfast wrap it is,” Martha said before turning to Neil. “And you, honey?”

“Egg-white omelette with spinach and a side of hash browns, please.”

Martha nodded. “Sure thing. You'll be wanting your usual waffles to go?”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Matt's phone chimed again as Martha strode off to the kitchen. Neil hit a button to wake up the screen and looked at what the girls had sent.

 mùi spilling is fine and allson stop texting like a dick

Whatever do you mean, Danielle?

its 2 early for this

Get on my level or gtfo

look wat u did neil

Neil hid a small laugh behind his hand before typing back. Good luck with that dan ttyp

He slid the device back in front of Matt's face and took a sip of coffee. After a few moments, Matt sat up and drank half his water in one go. Then, he dumped sugar into his coffee and stirred it noisily.

“You going to survive?” Neil asked.

“Kevin tried to tell me that I drink wrong.” Matt took a sip of coffee and then tried to affect Kevin's condescending tone. “Don't waste my time with soda, Boyd. This isn't a six-year-old's birthday party.”

Neil snorted.

“If Andrew ever chokes him again I won't be the one to stop him.” Matt yawned loudly into his fist and continued, “Speaking of Andrew, did you two do anything fun last night?”

“Nah, we just went to bed.” Neil rubbed at a spot of dried jam on the table and avoided Matt's eyes.

“Mhm.” Matt pushed the glasses up on top of his head and looked at Neil seriously. “You know Exy is a team sport, right?”

Neil's forehead scrunched. “Um, yeah?”

“Yeah, so when we lose three games in a row it's a team thing. That's not on you.” Matt took another careful sip of coffee and gave Neil a moment to process. “You looked like you wanted to puke all over the locker room floor last night.”

“I'm fi-” He stopped when Matt raised an eyebrow at him. Neil had promised him honesty long ago. “I'm failing at this.”

“What makes you say that?”
“It's just that-” Neil floundered for words to match the ugly ball of feelings mucking up his heart. “I can't care about the underclassmen the way Dan would have and I'm not doing enough for them.”

Matt frowned. “Everyone knows you care about this team more than anything. The underclassmen-”

“They weren't with me in Baltimore. They'll never be family the way you guys are.” Neil looked down at his hands in his lap. “I don't know how to fix this, Matt.”

“Nothing's broken, Neil. We just lost a few games, that's all.”

Neil's anxiety was building in spite of Matt's reassurance. Neil could feel it swarming up his spine and clouding his lungs. It was only a matter of time before it spilled over and made his feet itch to run. He wondered if Andrew would be up for a long drive later. They'd all gone to Columbia the previous weekend, but it had only resulted in a fight between Aaron and Nicky instead of letting them all unwind like they'd needed to.

A few minutes later, Martha came back with their food. Matt chatted with her briefly about how Dan was doing, while Neil unwrapped his silverware and fiddled with the paper napkin. When Martha started asking about what Matt planned to do after his graduation, Neil's stomach rolled so hard it squashed his appetite.

To distract himself, he snagged Matt's phone again and read the ongoing conversation. Dan and Allison had stopped bickering and were now discussing weekend plans, while Renee had yet to send anything. Neil mentally calculated what time it was in North Dakota and guessed she was still asleep.

When Martha patted Matt's cheek and left them to eat, Matt shot Neil a smile and asked, “All right, Cap, how are gonna start winning?”

An hour later, Neil was feeling slightly better about the Foxes' chances for their next game. Matt had given his insight on the backliners' issues- Holly had trouble sticking to plays, Lizzy doubted herself when things got messy, Aaron and Nicky were both losing motivation now that they were that much closer to graduating. They'd texted the girls at one point and Dan had offered some helpful advice. Allison suggested they make the freshmen sleep on the court until they figured their shit out, but Neil decided to ignore that.

Around ten-thirty, they left the diner with Neil's to-go box of waffles and a plan for the upcoming week of practices. Matt had perked up enough to drive and they spent the whole ride back talking about how long they expected Kevin's liver to last with the way he drank. They made it to the third floor of Fox Tower just as some of their teammates were stumbling hungover and groaning out of their dorms.

“Morning, zombies!” Matt shouted cheerfully, earning him a round of unintelligible groans and one “fuck you, Matt” from Sheena. Neil stood at his door for a moment and watched Matt breeze down the hallway. Matt ruffled Lizzy's hair, placed his sunglasses on Brook's grimacing face, and laughed at whatever she said to him. Colby lifted his phone to snap a picture. Yvonne bumped Matt's fist with hers as they passed each other and then she shouted at Sheena to keep up.

“Cap'n,” Lizzy mumbled as she shuffled past Neil. Brook gave him a grim smile.

Neil gave a small smile in return before unlocking the door to his suite and stepping inside. Nicky was sprawled across the kitchen floor while Kevin stepped over him to fix himself a cup of coffee.
Andrew sat at his desk with a textbook and a few papers spread out in front of him. Neil didn't say anything to the two in the kitchen as he crossed the main room to set the take-out box of chocolate chip waffles beside Andrew's book.

Without looking at him, Andrew reached out and brushed two fingertips along the edge of Neil's armbands at his wrist. Neil smoothed down an unruly section of Andrew's hair before going over to his own desk to start on his assignments.

After Kevin drank two cups of coffee, he hauled Nicky off the floor and the two of them ambled off to the dining hall for an early lunch. Neil knew once Kevin had enough food and coffee in him to feel like a human again, he'd want to talk about the previous night's game and watch footage to work out what went wrong. He knew he'd most likely spend the rest of his Saturday talking about strategy and drills, but if he was honest with himself there was nothing he'd rather do more.

His phone buzzed with a text message. Flipping it open, he saw Lizzy's name and after it: extra practice later??

Ten minutes later, a second message came in, this time from Yvonne: can I borrow court keys? I wanna run those raven drills later.

Within half an hour, Neil had received texts from four more underclassmen asking about weekend practices. He thought of how alone he'd felt the night before and how anxious he'd been about how he was going to motivate the team. Looking through the small collection of messages from his Foxes, all eager to get back on the court as soon as possible, he almost wanted to laugh at himself.

Neil sent out a mass text to the team: open practice today @ the court 2-6pm

Andrew flipped open his phone a moment later and muttered, “Junkies.”
Birthdays are complicated for the Minyard twins.

Thank you so much for the comments, kudos, and kind messages on tumblr! I am really behind in replying, but I wanted to say that I appreciate all of you guys!! Just the fact that you read my stuff means a lot to me <3 <3

The twins' birthday fell on a Tuesday.

Neil said nothing to Andrew about it out loud, but after he woke up he took a moment to rub his thumb over the date on his phone's screen and think. He knew the twins couldn't have many good memories associated with the day, but he dared to hope they had collected a few since coming to Palmetto State.

Renee had sent both of the twins gifts that arrived the day before. Neil could see that she'd filled the entire inside of Andrew's birthday card with words and wondered why she didn't just send a letter. Inside plain blue wrapping paper was a novel, which Andrew tucked under his pillow and said nothing about.

Andrew was listless at morning conditioning and Aaron was apathetic, but that wasn't out of the ordinary. Only Nicky seemed to be dismayed by their normal behavior. Waiting in the locker room were birthday cards and chocolate bars from Bee, bottles of whiskey from Wymack, and gift cards to a Japanese steakhouse from Abby. If the other Foxes missed the gifts, they definitely didn't miss Nicky's enthusiasm. Apparently, he and Katelyn had planned a party and reserved a study room down in the Tower's basement for it that evening.

Matt shot Neil a look across the locker room when Nicky declared that the whole team was invited. Matt obviously didn't know how to feel about a birthday party for the Minyards, of all people, but Neil knew he'd probably show up anyway. Most of the younger Foxes would attend anything as long as there was free booze.

Neil took his cues from Andrew, which meant he kept quiet and carried on like it was any other Tuesday. Wordlessly, he changed his clothes and started thinking about what he needed for his morning classes.

Away from Nicky's excited chatter, it did feel like a normal day. Neil turned his thoughts toward statistics as he found a seat in his nine-thirty lecture. Soon, he was lulled into a stupor by his professor's droning voice and he forgot what day it was entirely.

This did not last long, however.
Twenty minutes into Neil's eleven o'clock class, Nicky texted him, *andrew 911!*

Neil stuffed his books and notes into his bag, abandoned the pencil that rolled onto the floor, and bolted out of the classroom with a chest full of icy panic. Adrenaline burned in his veins as he sprinted across campus toward the Tower. His shoes beat against the sidewalk, his legs screamed at being overworked, his lungs were full of fire. A few people yelled at him as he went crashing past, but he couldn't hear them through the rush of blood in his ears. He'd seen enough horror in his life for his imagination to conjure images gruesome enough to block out the pain in his legs. Andrew hurt, Andrew bleeding, *Andrew Andrew Andrew.*

It took him two tries to swipe his ID just to get into the Tower. Some members of the swim team gave him bizarre looks as he threw himself past them into the elevator. The doors closed, the elevator pulled upward. Neil sagged against the wall and gasped for breath. The air scraped his throat raw. His pulse was hammering in his temples. His legs were boneless.

When the doors opened on the Foxes' floor, Neil saw Nicky standing outside the door to their suite. He tried to shout his name, but it came out as a wheeze.

Nicky turned in surprise and said, “Neil! Thank fuck.”

In his hands, he clutched a pink-striped bag so tightly the edges wrinkled under his fingers. Confusion hit Neil like a wave. Nicky didn't look like he'd found Andrew bleeding or dead as Neil had feared.

“Nicky, what's-” Neil stopped and grabbed at the wall while he coughed.

“Andrew's in a mood,” Nicky said, frowning at him. “Are you okay? Did you run all the way here?”

Neil's scowl was ruined by another rattling cough. “Nicky, I thought it was an emergency. What the hell?”

“Oh, well, it sort of is.” Nicky clapped Neil on the shoulder. “He turned the heat way up in there. I think he wanted to sweat us out. Kevin took off already.”

“What happened?” Neil adjusted the strap of his messenger bag and knocked Nicky's hand off him.

“Fuck if I know. Some good birthday sex should cheer him right up, though, so get in there, lover boy!” Nicky took a large red bow out of the pink gift bag and peeled the paper off the adhesive backing so he could slap it onto Neil's forehead. Neil was still trying to process what was happening when Nicky shoved the gift bag into his hands, pushed him into the suite, and pulled the door shut after him before scurrying down the hall.

The first thing Neil noticed was the unbearably high temperature in the dorm. The second thing he noticed was the furious heat in Andrew's eyes. He was half-buried in a beanbag and wearing a black long-sleeved shirt, black sweatpants, and socks. From his place in the middle of the main room, he watched Neil like he would've watched a predator.

The adhesive on the bow gave out and it fell from Neil's forehead to bounce off his shoe. It drew his gaze downward to the pink bag he was still holding. Tucked inside a nest of pale tissue paper, he found a black jar with “midnight chocolate” scrawled across the front in shiny magenta letters. Neil rolled his eyes and dropped it on the floor along with his messenger bag. He kicked off his shoes and padded over to the thermostat to turn it back down to a reasonable setting.

Sweat slid down his neck as he crossed the suite to the bedroom, ignoring Andrew's stare. He
shoved the window up to invite cooler November air inside before trading his hoodie and jeans for shorts and a clean t-shirt. He stripped off his armbands as well before grabbing his phone and heading back out to face Andrew.

He stood at the edge of the main room with his phone clutched in his hand. Andrew did not look like he was in need of “good birthday sex” although Neil would have been more than happy to provide some. Instead, Andrew looked like the word “no” in human form, wrapped in black and radiating the promise of violence. Neil almost believed that turning the thermostat wouldn't do the room any good. Andrew's anger was a boiling sun ready to set fire to anyone who got too close.

Something had gone seriously wrong.

*What did u say to him?* he texted Nicky.

*idk? just said he shud spend his bday with his bro??*

Andrew was still staring right through him.

Neil typed another message to Nicky. *Give us a couple hours atta boy!!!!*

Neil rolled his eyes and went to the kitchen to gather together a bottle of whiskey, a tub of chocolate ice cream that was streaked with ribbons of caramel and marshmallow fluff, a spoon, and a bag of chocolate-covered pretzels. He didn't miss the way Andrew stiffened when he got close enough to put his offerings at Andrew's socked feet. Crouching, Neil studied Andrew's face for a moment.

Andrew's dry lips cracked into an ugly sneer. “Do you have a *special present* for the birthday boy?” The sickly-sweet tone he used suggested all the wrong things. Neil had a decent idea what he meant and it made him want to throw up.

“Do you want anything?” Neil asked quietly.

“No.”

“Okay.”

Andrew's cruel hint of a smile flattened into its usual shape. Neil held his breath while Andrew stared him down, patiently waiting for Neil to make a wrong move. It would be over if he did. He was walking on ice that was already cracked.

“Why are you here?” Andrew asked eventually.

“Nicky said there was an emergency.”

“What a good boy, to come when you're called.”

Neil swallowed thickly and asked, “Do you want me to stay?”

“It's a free country.”

“I need a yes or a no, Andrew. Can I stay?”

Andrew tilted his head. “Yes.”
Neil relaxed slightly. “Nicky and Kevin won't be back for a few hours. Do you want to change into something more comfortable?”

“No.”

“Okay.” Neil held his stare for a moment longer before getting up and heading over to the door to get his bag. While his back was turned, Andrew reached for the ice cream.

As the suite gradually cooled down, Neil sat on the carpet a few feet away from Andrew’s beanbag and worked on an essay that was due that Thursday. Reruns of an old game show played on the television in front of them. Andrew stared at the screen blankly and ate his ice cream.

An hour passed before Andrew stood up, slowly like his joints had filled with concrete, and padded into the bedroom. Neil looked up as he emerged barefoot in gray sweats and a t-shirt. The armbands were still there, but the anger in his eyes had dimmed.

They didn't talk or touch. They spared each other brief glances and shared sandwiches when Neil's stomach growled louder than the game show's theme music. When the time for afternoon practice was drawing near, Andrew took out his phone and texted someone.

The only thing Andrew said to him was, “I'm going to Bee's later.”

Kevin and Nicky were wisely cautious when they returned to put their books and belongings away before practice. Neil was pulling on his shoes when he noticed how Andrew was standing in the middle of the main room, staring at nothing.

“Is Andrew coming to practice?” Kevin asked, nudging Neil's side with his elbow.

“No,” Neil called, “are you coming to practice?”

“No.”

Kevin scowled. “But-”

“He said no, Kevin. Let's take the Lexus over to the court.”

Kevin huffed, but he gave no further argument. Nicky watched his cousin for a little while longer before following the two strikers out to the hallway. He was chewing his lower lip and slouching a little, but he tried to smile anyway when he caught Neil's eyes.

Whatever Wymack saw on Neil's face was enough to keep him from asking questions about where Andrew was. Sheena complained about Neil “playing favorites” and got a few murmurs of agreement from Jack and Eddie, who had skipped practice at least three times in as many weeks. Neil didn't bother defending himself, but the three of them got a look from Aaron that was full of warning.

By the end of practice, Nicky's enthusiasm had returned in full. He was still talking loudly in German to Aaron about the cake Katelyn had picked out when Matt sidled up to Neil in the locker room.

“Everything okay?” Matt asked.

Neil glanced up at him as he pulled off his shoulder padding. “No, but there's not much I can do about it.”
“Something happen with Andrew?”

“Bad day.”

Matt nodded sympathetically and ruffled Neil's sweaty hair before moving back to his own locker. Neil finished changing out and headed to the showers, avoiding Nicky's eyes. He tried not to worry as he scrubbed himself clean under the hot spray. There was no fixing what had happened to Andrew, but he was frustrated by how completely useless he felt.

Once Neil finished showering and got dressed, Nicky stopped him by the sinks, rambling, “Do you think you can get Andrew to swing by the party for a bit? He would if you asked him, you know. It's his birthday, for crying out loud. He should celebrate his birthday. Aaron would-”


Kevin wandered over to them to see what was taking them so long. Aaron was close behind him with his phone in his hands, no doubt texting Katelyn.

“Neil, please, talk to him. I just want him to be with his family on his birthday.”

Neil stared up at him for a long, quiet moment. Nicky was trying. Nicky loved his cousins fiercely and he obviously believed celebrating their birthday together would help bring them closer in some way. This was important to him, but Neil wasn't willing to push Andrew into anything he didn't want to do. Too many people had done that already.


Aaron sighed. “Can we go now?”

In the passenger seat of the Lexus, Neil pulled out his phone and called Andrew. He looked out the window at the darkening sky as he listened to the line ring. Behind him, Nicky was practically vibrating with excitement as he talked to Kevin about his plans to go bar-hopping with the Vixens and Aaron that weekend.

Neil heard a click when Andrew finally answered his phone, but Andrew didn't say anything afterward.

In Russian, Neil said, “We're on our way back. Your cousin wanted me to ask if you'll come to the party.”

“No.” Andrew sounded like it was an effort just to pry his jaw open wide enough for words to slip out.

“Aw, Russian's no fair,” Nicky complained.

Neil ignored him. “Did you see your doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Have you eaten dinner?”

A sigh. “Yes.”

“I'm going to go to the party for a little bit.”

“I'll see you on the roof later.”
Okay.”

Andrew disconnected the call. Neil snapped his phone closed and tucked it back into his pocket. He looked up at the squares of yellow light on the Tower's side showing through the naked trees as the Lexus drew closer to the parking lot's entrance.

“Well?” Nicky prompted.

Neil answered, “He doesn't want to go.”

“Shocking,” Kevin deadpanned. Aaron grunted in agreement.

Nicky made a small, disappointed noise. “Maybe next year. I just... we have less than two years, you know? I don't know how often we'll see each other after graduation.”

Neil's stomach knotted tightly and his thoughts evaporated into steamy panic. He felt hot and cold all over. He had no idea what Andrew would do after he left Palmetto. He didn't know if Andrew would consider playing Exy professionally or if he'd had enough of it. Neil knew how easily someone could disappear and suddenly he was terrified Andrew would just vanish one day, too bored by Neil and his Exy obsession to bother returning.

“Neil.” Kevin's voice broke through his haze. When Neil blinked up at him, Kevin gestured to the windshield. “We're here.”

Nicky and Aaron were already walking through the front doors of the Tower. The Lexus was silent and parked next to the Maserati. Kevin was still staring at him like he could read Neil's mind.

“What if Exy isn't enough for him?” Neil asked.

“I'm not going to hold your hand, Neil,” Kevin answered snidely before throwing his door open and climbing out.

Sullen, Neil followed him into the Tower and up to their floor. The other Foxes were out in the hallway, carrying cardboard boxes filled with cans of beer and bottles of liquor toward the elevator. Matt grinned at Neil over a tray of Jell-o shots that Tara had made. Lizzy and Brook were walking with their arms linked together, both sporting glow stick bracelets and candy necklaces. Sheena and Yvonne were dressed in jackets and talking lowly as they headed for the stairwell, obviously intent on going elsewhere for the night.

Inside the suite, Andrew was nowhere to be found. Nicky tried to bury his disappointment under a cheery grin and a joke about Aaron playing both parts that night. He and Aaron both changed into black jeans and shirts usually reserved for Columbia trips. Neil stayed in his sweats and a t-shirt, not seeing the point in dressing up for a trip to the basement.

Neil answered the door when Katelyn knocked and exchanged a few pleasant words while they waited for the others to finish getting ready. Nicky had dragged Aaron into the bathroom, insistent on styling his hair, and Aaron had let him.

“So Andrew's not coming tonight?” Katelyn asked, looking around the main room for signs of him.

Neil shook his head and pretended he didn't notice the little look of relief that crossed her face. He didn't blame her, of course. From what Katelyn had seen of Andrew, she had every right to be terrified of him.

“Are you two doing anything special or-?” she trailed off and bit her lip.
Neil said, “We'll probably just go to Columbia this weekend.”

“Oh, well, that'll be nice.” Katelyn smiled at him kindly. She glanced toward the bathroom and admitted, “I wish they'd get along.”

“It's getting better,” Neil offered, which was true even if hardly anyone could see it. Andrew and Aaron would never be brothers in a way that Katelyn could understand. The shards of their messy relationship were still sharp enough to draw blood, but their bond wasn't something that could be destroyed.

The bathroom door opened and Nicky ushered Aaron out to the main room by his shoulders. Aaron looked faintly annoyed, but his eyes softened once he saw Katelyn. His hair was stylishly mussed in a way that looked purposefully unintentional and Neil caught a whiff of the expensive cologne Nicky had bought for himself over the summer.

Neil looked away as Aaron and Katelyn shared a quick kiss. Nicky tried to convince Neil to wear something better, but Kevin came out and said he wouldn't wait for Neil to change, so they all headed out together.

They took the elevator down to the basement. Music poured out of the room at the end of the hall, where the Foxes and a few of Katelyn's closest friends on the squad were already drinking. Kevin made a beeline for the table at the back where multicolored bottles were crammed together between stacks of plastic cups. On the adjacent table was a stack of pizza boxes, mixing bowls full of chips and pretzels, and a massive cake covered in blue fondant with elaborate flowers piled at the corners and “Happy Birthday Aaron & Andrew” written across the top.

Neil grabbed a bottle of apple ale from the table and settled against the wall where he was out of the way of the Vixens who were dancing in the center of the room to whatever pop song was blasting out of the iPod docking station. Lizzy and Brook were dancing with them, pausing every now and then to refill their cups. Neil noted that Brook's ex-girlfriend Riley was absent, something he was privately grateful for. Nicky knocked back a quick series of shots with Kevin before dancing with the cheerleaders and the more outgoing Foxes.

Brian, Tommy, and Eddie did shots together and their laughter increased in volume after each one. Joel was dancing with a red-haired cheerleader with one hand on her hip and the other wrapped around a bottle of beer. Aaron shared a mixed drink with Katelyn, while Kevin drank vodka like it was water. Matt was pouring himself drinks beside Kevin, but Neil could tell he wasn't trying to keep up with Kevin's insane pace.

The air was full of thumping music and laughter and shouted attempts at conversation. The Foxes threw themselves into inebriation with the same desperation they brought to the court, eager to drown the deep-seated wounds that qualified them for the team in the first place.

Neil watched Lizzy take out a crumpled card from her back pocket and bounce over to where Aaron was sitting on a folding chair with Katelyn perched comfortably in his lap. Neil couldn't hear them over the music, but he saw Aaron laugh at whatever was on the card. Katelyn shook her head in mock exasperation and ruffled Aaron's hair.

Lizzy and Aaron had started working better together on the court ever since Lizzy had switched her major to bio-chemistry. They shared a class now and, according to Nicky, Katelyn got along well with Lizzy. Their overlapping interests and Katelyn's approval seemed to soften Aaron toward the younger backliner. Neil was still baffled at the sight of them laughing together.

Matt wandered over to lean against the wall beside Neil and said, “It's weird without the girls.”
“Very weird,” Neil agreed, still watching Aaron.

“Someone needs to teach Kevin how to drink for fun instead of drinking to forget.”

“Forgetting is fun for Kevin.”

Matt cracked a smile and took another swig of his drink. Then, he nodded at the bottle in Neil's hand and said, “Apple ale? Really?”

“I don't want to get drunk,” Neil explained, shrugging. “It's not terrible.”

Matt smiled slyly. “Oh, right. Don't wanna get too wasted to get it up for your boy later.”

Neil shoved his shoulder and laughed when Matt feigned injury.

He stayed long enough to see Brook invite Lizzy to nibble some candy pieces from her necklace, to see Colby holding a thoroughly intoxicated Brian upright while they swayed to an upbeat song, to see Katelyn feed Aaron a bite of cake and kiss the crumbs from his cheek. Neil watched Nicky pull Katelyn and Aaron up to dance with the others. He heard Matt drunkenly and loudly bellow a few lines of “God Save the Queen” to Kevin and saw when Kevin tried to put him in a headlock even though he looked almost amused.

Neil felt a curl of warm fondness as he leaned against the wall watching the Foxes enjoy themselves.

When it was nearing ten o'clock, he tossed his empty bottle into the garbage bag in the corner and turned to leave, but Aaron stepped directly into his path. Aaron lifted an eyebrow and held up a plate of cake with a fork stabbed into the middle and a generous glob of extra icing smeared across one of the sides.

“Get your ugly ass out of here, Josten,” Aaron said.

Neil nodded and took the cake from him. “Don't drown in tequila.”

“Don't fall off the roof.”

Neil waved good-bye to Matt, who gave him a dopey grin and two thumbs up, and Kevin, who rolled his eyes. He slipped out into the cool air of the hallway and strode down to the stairwell.

After wrenching the finicky door open, Neil stepped out onto the roof and shivered when the cold night air washed over him. By the yellow glow of the streetlights along Perimeter Road, Neil could make out the shape of Andrew seated near the edge of the roof. The chill seeped through Neil's thin t-shirt and armbands quickly as he walked over to him.

Andrew was wrapped in his coat with the bottle of whiskey from Wymack beside him and a cigarette leaking smoke between his fingers. Neil's coat was bundled up and waiting in Neil's usual place.

“Happy Tuesday,” Neil said. “Aaron sent this up for you.”

Andrew looked up at him and reached for the plate. Neil handed it over before lowering himself down beside Andrew. He pulled on his coat and took a quick drink of whiskey from the almost full bottle. Andrew gave his cigarette to Neil so he could take a bite of cake. For a while, silence hung comfortably between them. Neil breathed in the smell of smoke and looked out over the lights of PSU's campus. It was easier to push his worries about Andrew's future away with Andrew's steady
presence beside him.

After his fifth bite of cake, Andrew lifted a forkful of icing in offering up to Neil's lips. Neil eyed it for a moment before slowly taking the fork into his mouth. Andrew watched as Neil pulled off, licking a smear of blue from his lip. The sweetness of it made Neil's mouth water and jaw tingle.

Wrinkling his nose, Neil swallowed and groaned. “Ugh, poison.”

“Drama queen,” Andrew muttered.

Neil shuddered. “I'm serious I can feel my internal organs shutting down.”

Andrew leveled him with flat stare as he shoved a large bite into his mouth. Neil's stomach turned at the thought of all that cake, but then it twisted into something pleasant as he watched Andrew lick the fork clean with an efficient swipe of his tongue.

“No,” Andrew said.

“Yeah.”

Holding his gaze, Andrew took another slow bite and then he dropped his eyes to watch Neil's throat work as he swallowed. The air changed between them. Andrew lowered the fork to the plate and licked his lower lip.

Andrew leaned in first, but it was Neil that asked, “Yes or no?”

“Yes,” Andrew answered, “but just kissing.”

“Just kissing,” Neil agreed. He flicked the cigarette aside as Andrew pulled him closer by his collar. Andrew kissed the small smile from his lips and licked the taste of icing from his tongue. Neil leaned into the kiss enthusiastically, but kept his hands tucked into his pockets. Andrew slid his hand around the side of Neil's neck and pressed his thumb into his pulse point. They kissed until Neil's mind cleared and his stomach was pleasantly warm. When they finally pulled apart, Andrew's eyes were focused and dark and his lips were swollen and damp.

They shared another cigarette, a few more bites of cake, and some whiskey as they watched cars and students down below on Perimeter Road.

The day ended just like any other Tuesday.
Runaways

Chapter Summary

Neil confronts Holly.

Chapter Notes

I keep telling myself that I'm going to sit down and reply to all your lovely comments, but I've been a bit short on time lately and I'm very sorry about that. I really really love hearing what you guys think and I adore you all for continuing to read! I can't thank you enough <3

The Foxes' last game in December was a home game against the Breckenridge Jackals. Not only did they manage to win, but they also managed to secure themselves a spot in the spring championships. Neil's relief left him hollowed out and light-headed.

In the foyer, he stopped and answered some questions for the eager reporters as politely as he could. He brushed aside the more callous inquiries about the on-court brawls with barbed comments about the Jackals' dirty tactics that evening. Jack received more than one question about his mental health and stress levels, which made him grit his teeth so hard Neil thought he might pop a blood vessel in his head. When the younger striker's cheeks turned an alarming shade of red, Neil cut off the reporters with a bland “Thank you for your time” and ushered Jack away.

In the changing room, Neil slumped onto a bench for a few moments and tried to breathe through the crushing weight of his relief. Some of the other men shouted and cackled and reveled in their triumph. Andrew was silent at Neil's side and Neil knew the goalkeeper's stare would ward off any unwanted attention from the others while he collected himself.

It had been close. Too close. Neil's fear of failure had been dragging him down into a dark pit of anxiety ever since Thanksgiving. They'd spent the holiday in Gaithersburg, Maryland at Dan's new apartment. Dan had meant well when she pulled Neil into her small kitchen that smelled like turkey and burned pie crust and said,“You know, even if the team doesn't make it to championships, you're doing a really good job, Neil.” It hadn't made him feel any better.

Neil rubbed his forehead and listened to Brian, Matt, and Nicky laughing uproariously at Tommy's impression of Wymack's reaction when Andrew had left his box to make what should have been an impossible pass to Kevin, which resulted in the risky but impressive goal that turned the tide of the game after a rough start.

Neil tried not to feel ill about the ugly bruising on Matt's face. He tried not to feel angry at Holly for starting the fight that had earned her a sprained wrist and her second red card of the season. He tried to forget the way “Hey, Wesninski” rolled out of the other captain's mouth when they met at half-court for the coin toss.

Andrew's hand curved around Neil's elbow, startling him out of his mental fog. Neil blinked at him
questioningly and Andrew slid a meaningful look over Neil's shoulder.

When Neil turned, Kevin was there with a stony look.

“We got lucky,” Kevin said, staring into Neil like he could read the words printed at the back of his mind. “Luck won't get us any farther.”

“Oh, lighten up, Kevin! We won!” Nicky called.

Neil held Kevin's reproachful gaze and quietly said, “I know.”

What he didn't know was how to get the underclassmen to try harder, to care more. Exy meant something different to all of them - to some it was nothing more than a way out of a stifling hometown, to some it was an outlet for aggression and heartache, to Neil and Kevin it was like oxygen.

The pieces of the team were only just falling into place, months later than Neil hoped they would. He swept his eyes over the locker room and undid the straps of his shoulder padding. Matt and Holly matched each other in aggression, though Holly clearly had less restraint as well as an attitude problem that only appeared on game days. Aaron and Lizzy riled each other up with taunts and biting antagonism and, when they were angry, they were a force to be reckoned with. Brook was finally learning how to read Andrew's cues. Colby had developed some tricks to keep focused and mentally present, which Brian helped with. Ever since Jack and Yvonne had hit their stride the pair of strikers played like they were psychically linked.

It still wasn't enough, though. Neil could see their potential, but they were still falling short. It wasn't enough. Neil worried it would never be enough.

Andrew took the padding out of Neil's hands and set it aside. Neil blinked and followed Andrew's stare over to Joel, who was watching him unabashedly with a little wrinkle between his eyebrows. Matt and Nicky were looking his way as well and Neil could see their concern dimming their joy.

Neil managed a stiff smile and said, “You guys kicked ass tonight.”

Matt gave him a toothy grin and said, “We're going to kick ass in the spring, too.”

“Hell, yeah,” Nicky laughed, bumping fists with a grinning Brian.

Kevin shot him a scornful look over his shoulder as he headed off to the showers. Andrew stayed by Neil's side, quietly nudging him to keep him focused until he was finally getting into a shower stall to wash up.

When Neil stepped out, dressed in jeans and his orange hoodie, the team's excitement was still electrifying the air. Andrew was waiting for him with his bag by the sinks. He tilted his head and ran a searching look over Neil's face before stepping closer.

“Thank you,” Neil murmured, barely louder than the buzzing fluorescent lights overhead. He knew if Andrew hadn't fought so hard on the court the outcome of the game would have been vastly different.

Andrew lifted a shoulder. “At least we won't be bored in the spring.”

It was enough to pull Neil's mouth into a genuine smile. He leaned forward for a kiss, a firm press of closed lips that was a promise of more to come.
The others wanted to live loudly and carelessly for the next several hours. Wymack gave his Foxes a stern look and said, “Stay the hell out of trouble.” Matt was on the phone with Dan in the hall, grinning and gesturing wildly with his free hand even though Dan couldn't see him. Lizzy and Brook were ruffling Colby's hair and jostling him good-naturedly as Brian went on and on about Colby's good performance. Nicky and Aaron were discussing what types of liquor they needed to stock up on and whether or not Katelyn had made more vodka gummy worms.

Neil felt like he was watching a warm summer's day from inside a dark house. Their excitement didn't touch him. Their laughter wasn't loud enough to drown out the voice in his head saying, *You almost failed. You almost failed. You almost failed.* Getting comfortable in their victory would be dangerous. He couldn't afford to stop and enjoy the moment now that they had spring championships to look forward to. He couldn't afford to slow down when after this season Kevin would graduate and he would have to stand on his own to lead this team.

Oddly enough, it was Holly that distracted him from his mental maelstrom. She was standing on the opposite side of the lounge, shoulders hunched and jaw set with quiet determination. Her shaggy hair was hanging around her face, but her eyes weren't as guarded as they usually were. Instead of scowling at her feet or staring blankly at whoever was closest, she was taking in the room and her teammates as if she were trying to commit every detail to memory.

Neil knew that look. It was resignation. It was regret. It was *running.*

Neil didn't have any warm or fuzzy feelings about the younger woman, but she was a Fox. The Foxes had saved Neil's life once upon a time and he'd be damned if they didn't save her too.

Andrew shifted his weight to press their arms together, gaining Neil's attention at once. The team was beginning to filter out with plans for celebrations still forming. Neil overheard Brook and Lizzy say something about going over to Abby's house instead of the Tower and he knew that Holly would have the perfect opportunity to slip away unnoticed.

Nicky rode back to the Tower in Matt's truck with some of the younger men in the back and Aaron disappeared with Katelyn, so there were only three in the Maserati that night. Kevin brooded in the back, Neil fidgeted with his keys in the passenger seat, and Andrew was calm behind the wheel.

When they were parked in front of the Tower, Neil said, “You guys go ahead. I'll be up in a bit.”

Kevin got out and slammed the door shut before striding up the sidewalk. Andrew climbed out slowly, but after he shut his door he leaned against it. Neil watched him take out his pack of cigarettes and his lighter. Smiling to himself, Neil got out and rounded the front of the Maserati to stand beside Andrew and take the second cigarette from him.

Neil leaned against the car beside him and fished his keys out of his pocket with his other hand. He tilted them so they glinted with the light of a nearby streetlamp. They didn't weigh much, but the meaning behind them kept him safely anchored.

“You're quiet,” Andrew observed after he blew out a deep breath of smoke.

“Thought you wanted me to shut up,” Neil mumbled.

“I know how to shut you up when I want to.” Andrew took a quick pull off his cigarette, a sharp inhale before a smoky release. “Just tell me what the fuck is wrong with you. You're usually only this mopey when we lose.”

Neil tried to take a full breath around the ice in his lungs, but the more he thought the heavier the
weight on his chest got. There was too much pressure and his ribs were ready to cave in.

“Stop that,” Andrew hissed, clapping a cold hand around the back of Neil's neck.

Neil nodded and blinked rapidly, but couldn't force any sounds out of his mouth. He shoved the cigarette between his lips and sucked in a lungful of smoke to suffocate all the horrible words rattling around in his chest. He jerked his head to the side and stared at the lobby doors of the Tower. *Focus on something else.*

There was still no sign of Holly.

“Neil,” Andrew prompted.

“It's just a lot sometimes,” he tried to explain once he could get his tongue to cooperate. “I should be happy about tonight. I should be fine.”

“But you're not.”

“Yeah, it...” Neil took another drag. Looking his demons in the eye like this made him jittery and tense. His fingers shook around his cigarette. Andrew squeezed the back of his neck a little. Neil focused on the weight of his hand, the roughness of his skin, and felt his chest loosen. Andrew gave him time to untangle his messy feelings, pull them out one by one and sort them. Betsy had warned him on more than one occasion that stubbornly ignoring these greasy, clawed things in his head would backfire someday. Some days, days like this, he believed her even if he'd never admit it.

Finally, Neil said, “After I made the deal with Ichirou, I felt safe. I felt like I had my life back. Now, all I can think is that I can still fuck it all up and get a bullet instead of a diploma and it pisses me off. When we win, all I see is how close we were to losing.”

Neil was haunted by close calls and almosts.

“You've been having nightmares again,” Andrew added and Neil confirmed with an embarrassed nod. Sometimes he jolted too hard out of his nightmare and it sent a little telling tremor through the wood frame to Andrew's bunk above. Neil didn't want to admit that it comforted him somewhat knowing Andrew woke when he did, that Andrew knew even if Neil didn't tell him.

“I've been tense for weeks,” Neil said, flicking ash onto the pavement. “It's getting harder to shake it off.”

“We'll go to Columbia tonight.”

Neil slumped back against the Maserati and felt the ice in his lungs start to melt. They had already planned to go to Columbia the next night with the other three, but the thought of going early and just resting was infinitely more appealing.

Thoughts of Columbia and resting disappeared when Neil saw a lone figure step out of the front doors with a bag slung over her shoulder. There was still something he had to do that night before he could let himself relax into Andrew's brand of comfort. Handing his cigarette over, Neil pushed away from the car and strode up the sidewalk to head Holly off before she could dart into the shadows.

She froze as soon as she saw him. The flood of light from the lobby was at her back, making it difficult to make out her expression. Neil stopped several feet away with his shoulders squared. Holly was silent and still, waiting for Neil to make a move so she could counter it. *Typical*
“Going somewhere?”

Holly's shoulders scrunched up to her ears defensively. Lowly, she challenged, “What's it to you?”

“All your stuff fits in one bag. I know a runaway when I see one.”

“I'm not running.”

“Well, you sure don't look like you're staying.”

Holly scoffed. “‘Running’ implies 'being chased.' Nothing's chasing me, man. I'm just leaving, plain
and simple.”

Neil shifted his weight and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Why are you leaving?”

“It's been real swell having a roof over my head and all, but I see the way you and Queen Kevin
gawk at me and I don't need that shit, all right? So I'll just be on my way now.”

Neil didn't know much about Holly other than what had been written on her profile sheet. Born
May 11th, five-foot-eight, left-handed, spent two years playing for the St. Ambrose's Angels and
two years with the Granger Heights Giants. That didn't give him any clues about what she was
running from or running back to or why she looked like she wanted to set things on fire most of the
time. Neil felt out of his depth, but he was determined to keep swimming.

“So if you're not running away, what are you going back to, huh? What's waiting for you in Ohio? I
heard you talking to Lizzy about sticking around for break, so I know you had no plans to spend
Christmas in Cincinnati.”

“It's none of your fucking business, Josten.”

“What's it going to take, Holly? What do you need in order to stay?”

Holly gave a dismissive wave with her uninjured hand and tried to walk around Neil, but he
stepped into her path again. This close, he could see her scowling down at him.

“Move.”

“You can throw down with guys twice your size, but the fact that me and Kevin look at you
sometimes is enough to send you packing?”

“Get out of my way.”

Holly tried to shoulder past him, but Neil danced back a few steps to stay directly in front of her
and said, “You're a Fox, Holly. I can't just let you fucking disappear into the night without a word.”

“Oh, my god. I really don't have time for this,” Holly muttered as she pivoted and headed into the
grass.

“You're quitting school, so now you've got all the time in the world.”

Holly swatted at him clumsily with her right hand and missed. “Fuck off.”

“No.” Neil jogged in front of her again and shoved back when she hip-checked him. “Look, I
wanted to run when I was a freshman, too, but the Foxes gave me a reason to stay and it saved my
life. Let me give you a reason to stay. Tell me what it's going to take.”

Holly stopped and threw her bag to the ground, lip curled into a nasty sneer. Some of the other students walking down Perimeter Road stopped to look at the pair of them, although Foxes getting into fights was nothing out of the ordinary.

For a long moment, Holly stared him down and silently fumed with her hand clenched into a fist at her side. This stormy rage of hers was usually reserved for her opponents on the court. Neil only hoped that provoking it could get him some answers and maybe lead them to some sort of resolution that didn't involve Holly giving up the team.

“Kevin said you guys read my file,” she growled, voice shaking. “I'm guessing you know and that's why you've been staring at me like I'm your fuckin' trig homework- like you have bend your brain sideways to solve me.”

Neil blinked. “We... we looked at a profile sheet. I know your birthday and where you played- stuff like that.”

Holly glanced around at the group of curious lacrosse players passing by and shifted her weight. She was still agitated and itching for a fight even though her good arm was in a brace.

“If something's coming for you, you should talk to us and let us help you. We can deal with it as a team.”

“Why?”

“We're Foxes. That's what we do.”

Holly cracked a smile, but it was bitter and sharp. “Not all of us are as obsessed with this team as you are, man.”

“You got something better back in Ohio?”

“My step-dad's going to rehab,” Holly said with a long-suffering sigh. The way she said it sounded like a surrender.

Neil pressed the pad of his thumb into the jagged teeth of one of his keys and waited. He felt like he was seeing Holly properly for the first time since he'd picked her up at Upstate Regional back in June.

Holly waved her good hand dismissively when she realized he wasn't going to say anything. “I haven't... I haven't seen my mom much since I left home. My step-dad's always been a bit of a bastard to me, but it got worse after his accident. Gil got hooked on pain meds and he was too depressed to leave the house while he was in his chair, so he'd ask me to go buy shit for him- only it didn't stop at just asking. He'd pick and pick at me and, when that didn't work, he'd steal my phone or rip up my homework assignments. I had to keep my grades up to stay on the team, so I'd, you know, do what he wanted, but buying drugs turned into stealing shit so he could afford more drugs and it escalated from there. If I'd gotten arrested I would've definitely been kicked off the team and I didn't want to keep risking it. Mom was working all the time to stay on top of medical bills and she was too exhausted to do anything else, so I just... I figured it'd be easier if I left. I stayed in shelters mostly and got a job at a coffee place. Mom did what she could to help.” Holly dragged one shoe against the ground and took a deep breath. “She finally worked up the nerve to send him to rehab, though, so now I can... I can go home while he's not around.”

Neil put the pieces together with what he already knew to form the bigger picture of who Holly
Gray was. “So you left home when you were, what, sixteen? That's why you transferred to Granger Heights, right?”

Holly tilted her head and sucked her bottom lip between her teeth like she was weighing pros and cons in her head. Movement caught Neil's eye and he looked over just in time to see Andrew heading into the Tower.

“You really didn't look that closely when you read my file, did you?” Holly's tone landed somewhere in the murky territory between amused and anxious.

“Huh?”

“St. Ambrose's is a Catholic school.”

“Oh?” Neil struggled to find her point.

“For boys.”

Neil's mind stopped working altogether.

Holly swept her eyes around for any onlookers and then said, “I'm, um, I'm transgender- a trans girl.”

“Oh,” Neil said dumbly.

Holly tucked her good arm around her stomach and nodded slowly. “My mom got me on HRT and changed all my papers and sent me to Granger Heights after I came out. I left home when I was seventeen.”

“Oh.” Neil turned over these new facts in his head and then he asked, “Why are you giving up on Exy and school now? You did all that to protect your grades and your place on the team. It doesn't make sense.”

“I-” Holly stopped and shrugged helplessly. “I'm fucking tired, okay? I spend all my time either pissed off or feeling like I'm a fucking goldfish stuck in a bowl. This team is full of fuck-ups, you know, and Kevin still looks at me like I'm the one sticking out like a sore thumb.”

“That's just how Kevin looks at people,” Neil said dismally. Kevin still looked at him like that sometimes. He went on, “You have a reason to be pissed off, so if you want to beat the shit out of something, we have punching bags in the gym. Plus, you've got a whole team of pissed off, fucked up people who would probably be willing to spar with you.”

“But-”

“You have a scholarship and a shot at making a good life for yourself, Holly. Go back to Ohio for Christmas and see your mom then, but don't leave now. Don't give this up.”

Holly tilted her head and sighed heavily. “Do you really want me to stay or is this just so you can get a gold star for being a decent captain?”

Neil took out his key ring and carefully separated the court keys from the rest. His stomach twisted, but he knew he could get new ones from Wymack after the weekend. Holly looked down at him when she heard the jingling and then frowned deeply when Neil handed the court keys over. She held them in her palm and stared for a long moment.
“You're a Fox,” Neil reminded her.

“Go team,” she muttered softly.

“The code's zero-two-zero-four right now. I'll text you when it changes.”

Holly shook the keys a little, testing their weight. “You're annoyingly persistent.”

“Don't worry, I won't wait on a thank you.”

“Smart move. Save yourself from disappointment.”

Neil stepped back and turned toward the Tower before stopping again. “I'll see you Monday?”

Holly let out a theatrical groan and made a show of retrieving her bag. “Yes, Captain.”

She strode ahead of him toward the Tower and flipped him off as the elevator doors closed behind her. Neil shook his head and went for the stairs. When he made it to his dorm, Kevin was in the main room watching footage of their game on his laptop with his headphones on and Nicky was nowhere to be seen, probably out celebrating with the other Foxes. Andrew was in the bedroom with Neil's duffel bag open on the floor.

Neil leaned against the doorway and Andrew ignored him while he packed their clothes into Neil's bag. After a few moments, Neil noticed his backpack sitting on his bed. Corners of textbooks were straining against the fabric and the zipper was only half-closed. He didn't have to check to know that Andrew had packed up all the assignments he needed to finish that weekend. Andrew threw some balled up pairs of socks into the bag last and then crouched to zip it closed.

“Ready?” he asked.

Neil nodded and smiled. “Yeah, let's get out of here.”
In Neil's dream, he poured gasoline over vinyl seats and his mother's cooling corpse with only the cold moon as a witness. He struck a match and dropped it before his heart could thaw out enough to break. Flames crawled hungrily over the car and he turned his back on the destruction he caused. The moonlight reflecting off the black ocean shifted into illuminated windows of the Tower. There was no longer sand, but a sidewalk beneath his shoes. 

He began to think he was home, but the heat of the fire was still at his back. That wasn't right. Fear pierced his lungs as he turned. He choked on horror and smoke. The Maserati was burning- fire chewed away at the sleek exterior, a blinding ball of hideous orange surrounded it, the heat melted his cheek and his forearms in perfect circles.

Neil was unable to look away. There was still a figure behind the wheel. Flames licked over blond hair and vacant hazel eyes, turning black armbands and pale white skin to ash. The gas can fell from Neil's hands and hit the ground at his feet, sloshing pungent fuel over his shoes and the hems of his jeans. The fire soon found the trail and followed it to swallow him whole. 

His scream rose with him out of the dream and squeezed off into a whimper in the real world. Without thinking, he clamped onto one of Andrew's relaxed hands. Andrew immediately lashed out with the other, his aim perfect and deadly even in the dark. Stars exploded behind Neil's eyes when Andrew's palm slammed into the side of his head. Neil scrambled backward. Apologies fell from his mouth and he fell to the floor.

Head spinning, Neil dug his knuckles into the soft carpet in the dark, heaving for breath and struggling to get his bearings. His nose was plugged with the smell of gasoline and his lungs were full of foul smoke, but the fact that he could feel the carpet fibers against his hands proved he wasn't burning.

The mattress creaked. The ringing in his ear dimmed. Footsteps carried away from him just before light flooded the room. Neil clenched his eyes shut and buried his face in his hands. 

Hands on his shoulders pulled him upright and then pried his shaking fingers away from his eyes.
Andrew's face filled his vision as he crouched in front of Neil, staring at him hard.

“Neil.” It was a complete sentence and a dozen questions all at once.

“Sorry,” Neil wheezed. “I'm sorry. I didn't- I'm sorry.”

Andrew's hand curved around his neck, warm and whole and right. “It's over.”

“I'm- I don't.” Searing pain echoed in his burn scars.

“We're in our bedroom in Columbia. It's Saturday morning. You had a nightmare. It's over.”

Neil managed to inflate his lungs while he was half-distracted by the smooth cadence of Andrew's voice. He could still see the halo of flames burning away Andrew's hair and cheeks like a double exposure. Shuddering, he reached out with the need to feel Andrew's undamaged skin, but he caught himself at the last second. He hadn't asked permission, couldn't bring himself to ask so soon after crossing a line. He tucked his hands between his thighs and chewed his lip.

“IT's over,” Andrew repeated. “Say it.”

Neil swallowed hard. “It's- it's over.”

“Tell me where we are.”

“Our bedroom in Columbia,” Neil mumbled. He remembered now: they'd driven to Columbia after the game, after he gave his keys to Holly. They had gotten food at a drive-thru halfway there, eaten in the parking lot, and then switched places so Neil could drive the rest of the way. They'd brushed their teeth and then kissed with the counter digging into Neil's back until they were tired enough for sleep.

It was just a dream, Neil told himself. He could still smell gasoline and he could still feel his cheek melting under hot metal. Absently, he rubbed his knuckles against his burn scars just so he could feel his own cold skin instead. Andrew's eyes flicked down to the hand that was pressing into his cheek and he brushed his thumb slowly just under Neil's ear. Neil closed his eyes for a few seconds, focusing on Andrew's touch.

Slowly, the phantom pain receded. His head ached, but the guilt was worse. He could feel the tremble in Andrew's hand against his neck and he knew he was the one who put it there.

“I shouldn't have grabbed you,” Neil said quietly. Now that he was moving out of the clutches of his own nightmare, he could imagine the spike of terror he'd put through Andrew's chest.

“You were looking for a gun,” Andrew explained, knowing it was an old habit of Neil's that stuck stubbornly to his subconscious.

Neil winced and looked down at his knees. “No, I was looking for you.”

Andrew said nothing, but he reached up with his free hand to smooth over the stinging side of Neil's head. Neil understood what was left unsaid, so he answered with a kiss brushed against Andrew's wrist.


Andrew nodded and got to his feet, knees cracking stiffly as he did. Neil grabbed the edge of the mattress to pull himself up. His exhaustion was pushed away by his fear, but he could feel it
vaguely behind his eyes, warm and heavy like steam behind a shower curtain.

The house felt hollow and it made Neil uneasy. The black of night pressed heavily against the windows; it seeped in to encourage the shadows even as lights clicked on to shoo them away. When Andrew hit the switch for the kitchen light, Neil almost flinched at their ghostly reflections in window ahead of him. The whole world was out there, but Neil could only see two blurry men moving about in baggy t-shirts and flannel pajama pants. He tilted his head and watched for a moment, dazed, while Andrew quickly assembled the coffee pot.

Neil searched for fire in his reflection and found none, but he thought for a moment that he could feel the heat.

It was three-thirteen in the morning. Neil was a flickering letter in a neon sign, struggling to settle on a state of being. He was tired and awake, afraid and calm, empty and full. He felt long stretches of nothing with brief flashes of everything in between.

After a pot of decaf started brewing, Andrew leaned against the counter with his arms folded over his stomach and one ankle crossed over the other. He studied Neil openly like he expected to find a written explanation on his face. Neil couldn't think of the right words yet, so he hoped his expression said enough.

Neil inhaled deeply as the earthy scent of fresh coffee filled the air and let it wash out the memory of burning flesh and gasoline. When the coffee was ready, Andrew poured some into a thermos with some hazelnut creamer and twisted the lid on. Neil followed him wordlessly to the front door, where they paused to slip on coats and stuff their socked feet into sneakers, and then outside. Andrew handed the thermos to Neil and stopped at the edge of the porch to dig his pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

The temperature had dipped below forty degrees, almost cold enough to abide snowfall, almost cold enough to freeze the fire out of Neil's memory. The chill bit his cheeks and turned his sighs into soft, white clouds that dissipated quickly. The yellow glare of the porch light cast both men in stark relief, catching unruly strands of Andrew's hair and hanging odd shadows from his cheekbone and jawline. Some of Andrew was washed out by light while other parts were left in the dark.

The click of the lighter made Neil flinch, a reaction he tried to hide by taking a sip of coffee. Andrew didn't miss it, though. The tongue of flame writhed in the open air until Andrew made a decision. Only one cigarette was lit that night and the other went back into the crumpled pack with the lighter. Neil was silently grateful. He breathed in the warm scent of their flavored coffee instead of smoke.

It was too chilly to sit and Neil was buzzing with too much energy to be still, so they crossed the lawn to the sidewalk and set out into the night. The streets were quiet between neat rows of houses. Porch lights illuminated “Santa Stop Here” signs and wreaths of pine with fat red ribbons hanging from the front doors. A few houses were set apart by premature Christmas lights merrily glowing along gutters, winking drowsily from tree branches, and dripping from the eaves to mimic icicles that weren't likely to form in South Carolina's climate.

Neil remembered tidy displays of Christmas lights outside the house in Baltimore and a large evergreen tree set up near the window of the front room, so that passersby and neighbors could see the decoration when the drapes were drawn. For a month, the entire neighborhood was decked with lights and lawn ornaments, so the Wesninskis did their part to blend in.

When he was a child, Neil felt like he was being crammed into a photograph of someone else's home. The world outside was celebrating in brilliant reds and deep greens, happy colors that Neil
had no happy memories to associate with. He thought instead of snowy white towels stained red with blood soaked up from hardwood floors and piles of green money disappearing into coal black leather briefcases. He didn't dream of a man coming down the chimney with boxes in shiny paper, he dreamed instead of men coming in through the front door with badges and guns quick enough to stop the Butcher of Baltimore.

The twinkling white and blue lights were pretty, but temporary. In a few weeks, they would go dark and disappear into attics. In the black sky, the distant clusters of stars would remain even when they were overpowered by sunlight or imitated there on the ground. Neil tipped his head back and, wide-eyed, drank in as many stars as he could. Privately, he adored their permanence.

Neil didn't realize he'd stopped walking altogether until the thermos was gently pulled from his hand. Andrew held his cigarette between two fingers and took a slow drink of coffee, keeping his eyes on Neil while he did so. Neil stared back.

He accepted the thermos when Andrew offered it back to him. Andrew took another long pull off his cigarette and studied Neil's throat work as he drank. Neil snapped the lid closed, watching the smoke leak lazily from Andrew's mouth before being pushed out all at once by a sigh.

“I'm taking a turn,” Andrew announced.

Neil couldn't remember the last time they played this game. “All right,” he said.

“What are you afraid of?”

He thought of his mother's last breath and her bare bones. He thought of his stomach heaving as he vomited on the side of a highway leading to San Francisco. He thought of three girls stepping off a stage and into their futures, now former Foxes. He thought of the looming date of Matt and Kevin's graduation. He thought of Andrew and the empty space that would haunt Neil during his fifth year.


Andrew accepted this and then said, “I'm not going to freeze my ass off standing here. Let's go.”

“Where are we going?”

“Around the block.”

Neil watched him take a few steps, but his own body wouldn't cooperate. He felt so insubstantial he was vaguely afraid he'd get snatched by a breeze if he risked moving. Andrew noticed, of course, and came back for him.

“Come on, Neil,” he said with an impatient sigh as he slipped his hand into Neil's and pulled him forward.

Andrew didn't let go. They walked with their sleeves pressed together and their linked hands shielded from the world in the sliver of darkness between them. A siren wailed in the distance, the blinking lights of a plane slid across the sky, the soles of their shoes scraped against the rough sidewalk as their pace slowed. They traded the thermos and the cigarette with their free hands and let warmth continue to build between their palms.

The chill in the air irritated Neil's sinuses until he started sniffling every few minutes, but the remnants of his nightmare were cleared away.

Still, there was something ugly that had taken up residence in his chest, something he needed to
evict.

“You were dead.”

Andrew stopped walking, dropped the cigarette, and squashed it with his shoe. Then, he blew out the last of the smoke from his lungs and raised Neil's hand to the side of his neck, pressing their fingertips into his skin. His pulse was slow, but steady.

“It wasn't real,” Andrew said.

“Do you ever have nightmares like that?”

Andrew's eyes slid away for a moment. “Sometimes it's Aaron instead of me.”

The word *unfair* rang dimly in his mind. Neil brushed his thumb over the corner of Andrew's jaw and held his gaze. The only evidence of Andrew's feelings was the jump of his pulse beneath Neil's fingertips.

“My subconscious is a real asshole,” Andrew grumbled, taking Neil's hand in his again.

Neil cracked a small, sad smile as they resumed walking. “Mine too.”

They continued on in silence until they reached the driveway where the Maserati slept. Neil squeezed Andrew's hand in gratitude before letting go. He buried a wide yawn in his hand while Andrew unlocked the front door. They kicked off their shoes and shed their coats. Neil put the thermos in the sink and rinsed out the coffeepot while Andrew leaned heavily against the door frame.

Neil turned as he dried his hands off on a dish towel and noticed Andrew rubbing at his wrist. His stare was fixed to the floor halfway between them, absent and vaguely troubled. Neil could still feel the sore spot on the side of his head where Andrew had struck him. Guilt stung Neil's throat.

“I'll sleep on the couch,” Neil offered.

Andrew looked up at him and narrowed his eyes. His hands fell to his sides as he stood up straight and for a moment he studied Neil almost like he would an opponent. The defensive wall behind his eyes was only there a moment before his expression opened again and Neil could see his exhaustion, his hesitation.

“Okay.”

Andrew returned to their bedroom alone. From the base of the stairs, Neil listened for the click of the lock, but it never came. He let that comfort him a little as he dug out some blankets from the hall closet and went to the couch.

Sleep didn't come easy even though Neil could barely keep his eyes open. The cushions were uneven- the middle one was firmer from disuse- and the room was cold and open. He'd grown used to the safety of the bedroom, the comfort that came from a locked door, Andrew's breath falling evenly against his pillow.

Neil shifted and pushed his face into the thin pillow. There was a crusty patch near one corner from a drink Nicky spilled one night. His own breathing sounded too loud. He flipped onto his back and looked up at the dark ceiling. He tilted his head back so he could see the red dot of light on the smoke detector. He curled and uncurled his toes and dug one heel into the space between the cushion and the back of the couch.
He wondered when he'd stopped being able to sleep in uncomfortable places. For years, he'd slept on benches, on buses, on trains, huddled in hard corners with a gun three inches from his hand.

At some point, much later, he did manage to fall into a shallow sleep where there were no dreams or nightmares to toy with him. Every now and then, he surfaced into wakefulness when he twisted uncomfortably in the blankets or felt cold air on his feet.

He snapped fully awake when fingers slid into his hair. Andrew was leaning over him, wearing his coat. Light was coming in through the windows.

“I'm going to go get breakfast,” Andrew said.

Neil swallowed to wet his throat and replied, “Okay.”

Andrew took away his hand and padded out of the room. Neil listened to his footfalls and then to the door swinging open and shut. He heard keys scraping in the lock and then the lock snicking into place. Faintly, he could hear the engine of the Maserati.

Instead of going back to sleep, Neil sat up and rubbed his eyes. Andrew must have turned the heat up after he got out of bed because Neil was over-warm and sweating in his blankets now. Grimacing, he got to his feet and shuffled to the bathroom. After brushing his teeth and using the toilet, he stripped and climbed into the shower. The heat made him feel light-headed as he quickly washed his hair and scrubbed soap over his body. He didn't linger under the spray afterward.

With a towel wrapped around his waist, he went to the bedroom to dig out fresh clothes from the duffel bag laying open on the floor. He felt too warm for the thick sweatpants Andrew packed for him, so he wore a pair of basketball shorts that he'd left on a shelf in the closet along with a simple gray t-shirt. His armbands remained on the nightstand where he'd put them the night before.

Downstairs, he turned the television on and sat sideways on a recliner with his bare calves draped over the armrest. Neil took comfort in the steady chatter of the news anchors discussing the mundane things happening in and around Columbia. The weather promised to be fairly mild, there was a canned food drive at a church Neil had never seen, an accident on the freeway had backed traffic up for over an hour but resulted in no fatalities.

The front door opened and closed. Neil closed his eyes and listened to the fast food bag crinkle in Andrew's hand while he kicked off his shoes. Andrew went into the kitchen to set down the bag and the cardboard tray holding their coffee before taking off his coat. Neil didn't have to look, it was all routine.

Andrew headed back into the kitchen and Neil finally got up to follow him. His stomach grumbled when he smelled the greasy breakfast sandwiches. Silently, he leaned against the counter and took the sandwich and cup of coffee Andrew set aside for him. They ate standing up and facing each other without exchanging a single word.

After the wrappers and empty cups were stuffed into the bag and thrown away, Andrew went off to shower while Neil went to find the backpack stuffed with his schoolwork. He spread out on the carpet in front of the television and lay on his stomach to work. Almost all of the questions in the first packet were filled in by the time Andrew walked into the room and sat cross-legged beside Neil.

For a while, there was only the television chatter and the weight of Andrew's stare on his back. And then-
“Yes or no?”

Neil's pen stopped moving. He glanced over his shoulder and his eyes locked with Andrew's. In spite of his blank expression, Andrew's hooded hazel stare held a heat that sent arousal singing through Neil's core.

“Yes,” Neil murmured.

He was already burning by the time Andrew reached out to stroke the exposed sliver of skin just above his shorts. Andrew's fingertips trailed lightly over his hip and dipped down between his waistband and the jut of his hipbone.

Neil's chest felt muggy and electrified like a summer's thunderstorm. Andrew smoothed his hand against Neil's skin and slid it upward beneath his t-shirt. He spread his fingers between Neil's shoulder blades and, though there was no pressure or command, Neil flattened himself on the floor with his arms pillowed beneath his head.

Andrew pushed the t-shirt up until most of Neil's back was left exposed. The hard, scratchy carpet underneath him was in direct contrast to the smooth, feather-soft touch skating up and down his back. It lasted only a moment, however, before one of Andrew's hands ventured down to knead Neil's backside through his flimsy shorts. Neil bit back a little gasp when Andrew's thumb pressed purposefully down the cleft in the center and prodded at the sensitive crease above his thigh.

A hum of pleasure rumbled in Neil's throat. His eyes slipped closed, his mind focused entirely on Andrew's hot palms sliding up the backs of his thighs beneath his shorts. Andrew slipped his fingertips under the stretchy material of Neil's briefs, teasing them along the curve of his ass, while he massaged his thumbs into the apex of Neil's thighs. Arousal pooled thickly in Neil's groin and his legs shifted apart out of instinct.

One of Andrew's knees wedged between Neil's thighs and, taking the hint, Neil shifted onto his knees and widened them enough for Andrew to kneel between them. His body was bowed and open, vulnerable even with his clothes on. His shirt pooled around his shoulders, so Neil tugged it off and tossed it aside with his forgotten worksheets and pencils. Andrew grazed his fingers up the outside of Neil's thighs, lifting the flimsy material before letting it fall. Anticipation shivered through Neil, tightening in his balls and shortening his breaths into choppy little pants into the fibers of the carpet. Andrew cupped Neil's ass in his hands and experimentally spread his cheeks apart with firm pushes of his palms.

“Andrew,” Neil groaned.

Andrew slid a hand firmly between Neil's legs and rubbed at the spot just behind his balls through the fabric. Because of the cloth, the contact was frustratingly lacking in pressure. Neil choked on an impatient noise and tried to grind back into Andrew's fingers, craving something more. Instead of giving him what he wanted, Andrew raised up on his knees and lightly rested his groin against Neil's clothed ass.

Andrew hadn't fucked him since the weekend they spent in Birmingham back in the summer. His hesitation cut through the fog of desire and alerted Neil to the troubling topic that might be lurking somewhere nearby in Andrew's mind. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Andrew was staring fixedly down at the dimples at the base of Neil's spine. His hands were smoothing over Neil's hips and outer thighs as he contemplated something.

Neil pushed himself up onto his hands so he was properly on all fours and then rolled his hips back against the bulge growing between Andrew's legs. Andrew's eyes snapped up to Neil's and Neil
slowly repeated the motion. Fingers clamped around his hips, but they guided him through another
careful roll backwards instead of stopping him.

The fourth time, Andrew jerked forward to meet him and it startled a rough grunt from Neil's chest.
His head dropped between his shoulders. A deep, white-hot wanting surged in his belly.

“Andrew,” he tried.

Andrew bent down to scrape his teeth over the back of Neil's hip.


“Do you want to?”

The question caught him off guard. Andrew slid his hand up Neil's ribs and made him shiver hard.
The bite of Andrew's nails in his side flooded his skin with prickling goosebumps.

“Yes,” Neil gasped. “I want you to fuck me.”

Andrew hooked his thumb in Neil's waistband, stretched it a couple inches, and let it snap dully
against Neil's sensitized skin.


“There are condoms and lube upstairs.”

Neil swallowed hard. “Do you want to fuck me like this?” he asked with another purposeful push
against Andrew's groin.

Andrew slid his hands into Neil's hair and tugged sharply until Neil followed, rising up onto his
knees and leaning back into Andrew's lap. His palms burned from the imprints of the carpet and his
skin was overheated. He curved his back to fit against Andrew's chest and tried to suppress his
shiver when Andrew's hand slid over his clenching belly.

“I want to fuck you into the mattress,” Andrew murmured between Neil's shoulder blades.

Without any experience, the words would've ignited his blood. With the knowledge of just what
Andrew's body felt like driving into his, Neil was filled with a rush of liquid fire. He didn't care
how he might've looked, he ground his ass hard against Andrew's erection and stifled a desperate
whimper.

“Up,” Andrew ordered. “Bedroom now.”

Neil clumsily got to his feet and Andrew shot up behind him, shoving him toward the stairs. His
legs felt boneless and his cock was painfully hard, but Neil somehow managed to stumble up the
stairs with Andrew's steadying hand pressed to his back.

Inside the bedroom, Andrew went straight for the nightstand drawer where he'd left a spare bottle
of lube and a stash of condoms. Neil shoved his shorts and briefs to the floor. He crawled onto the
bed and flipped onto his back while Andrew squeezed lube onto his fingers. Andrew quickly took
his place between Neil's legs.

“Still yes?” Andrew asked.

Neil nodded frantically. “Fuck, yes.”
Andrew nodded once before rubbing one cold, slick fingertip against Neil's asshole. Neil pulled his knees toward his chest and apart to give Andrew easier access. He bit his lip as Andrew worked one finger in and out of him and tried to force his eager body to relax to quicken the process. The second finger slid in easily a couple minutes later and Neil let out a strangled moan. He could feel how tight he was around Andrew's knuckles, but the ache was pleasurable. The memory of Andrew fucking him came back stronger now that he was being filled again and a hot wave rolled through him.

"Andrew," Neil sighed, tilting his head back into the pillows. "Fuck, that feels so good."

"Tell me if it hurts," Andrew muttered as he carefully pressed a third finger inside him.

"Oh, God." Neil shuddered. He shifted his hips as Andrew's three fingers sank into him andgroaned loudly. "It's- fuck, it's amazing."

"Well, if you're satisfied with fingers-"

Neil lifted his head to scowl. "Do you or do you not want to fuck me?"

Andrew glared and curled his fingers hard against his prostate, sending a powerful tremor through Neil's body that squeezed a breathy moan from his lungs. Shaking, Neil fell back against the pillow and lost hold of his thoughts as Andrew continued to move his fingers.

"Andrew," Neil panted, "I'm- I'm good. Get a condom."

Neil cried out weakly when Andrew roughly withdrew his fingers. He tried to get his breathing under control while Andrew fumbled with the foil wrapper with slick and shaking fingers. After a few frustrating moments, Neil sat up quickly and tore the condom out of Andrew's hands to open it himself. He dropped the lubricated rubber into Andrew's palm and flopped back, sighing heavily.

"You don't have to thank me," Neil said dryly.

A moment later, Andrew had the condom rolled onto his cock and was pushing into Neil with impressive restraint. Andrew was flushed pink from his cheeks down to his ribs as he forced himself to go slowly as he slid in and out of Neil's ass. Neil didn't bother with trying to quiet his moans as Andrew filled him, stretched him in a deliriously pleasant way. He rocked his hips to meet Andrew's deep, slow thrusts and grunted Andrew's name.

When he was sure he could handle it, Neil said, "You can fuck me harder than that, Andrew."

Andrew looked up at him and his lip curled angrily. "Neil-"

"You said you wanted to fuck me into the mattress," Neil reminded him. "I'll tell you to stop if it hurts."

Pausing for a moment, Andrew studied Neil's slackened face and glassy eyes for signs of a lie. Neil knew he wouldn't find any. He clenched his muscles around Andrew encouragingly and that seemed to satisfy him. Andrew leaned forward with his hands on either side of Neil's shoulders, causing Neil's body to curl almost in half, and then he began to fuck into Neil with hard, deep thrusts.

Neil let go of his knees in favor of grabbing Andrew's shoulders and pulling himself up for a scorching, biting kiss. Andrew panted hotly into Neil's mouth as Neil's ankles hooked behind his thighs. Neil sucked Andrew's bottom lip hard and returned Andrew's groan with his own.
Andrew's hips stuttered and his breaths were choppy and rough. Neil could tell he was close, so he slid one hand between them and squeezed the leaking tip of his cock. Ducking his head to moan into Andrew's neck, Neil worked himself quickly toward the orgasm already building in his groin. The pleasure rose quickly, cresting sharply and holding him suspended somewhere beyond the reach of thought. Stars danced behind his eyelids and pleasure burst through him. His body went rigid, shaking, while he spilled over his hand, smearing over Andrew's stomach and his own chest. Andrew snapped his hips forward once, twice more and shuddered through his own orgasm.

“Andrew,” Neil sighed once he could remember how to. He kissed the salty sweat off Andrew's neck and gently bit his earlobe while Andrew came back down.

“Neil,” Andrew mumbled distantly.

Neil kissed the corner of his jaw and let go of Andrew's shoulders, laying back against the mattress. Andrew blinked hazily down until he finally swallowed hard and eased out of Neil's ass.

“Fuck,” Neil breathed, letting his legs fall open so Andrew could move. “That was amazing.”

Andrew got up to throw the condom away. Neil stretched out on the bed and yawned loudly while he admired the shiny drops of his cum sliding down Andrew's abs toward the wiry dark gold hair surrounding his flagging erection.

When he caught Andrew looking at him, watching for signs of discomfort, Neil flashed him a genuine smile and slowly got up from the bed. He grabbed a tissue to dab at the larger drops on his stomach that threatened to run down his legs and then went with Andrew to the bathroom to wash the sweat and cum and lube off of their skin.

Once they were clean and standing naked together at the sink, Andrew captured Neil's lips in a slow kiss that was reassuring and grounding. Andrew put one hand around the side of Neil's neck and there was no tremble in his fingers. Neil hummed contentedly against his mouth as Andrew's tongue pushed past his lips.

Wordlessly, they got dressed and then went out to sit on the porch steps with their thighs pressed together while they shared cigarettes. They watched smoke curl away from them and dissipate in the cool air. There was no tension in Andrew's posture. There was nothing wrong. Besides the deep satisfaction that left Neil soft and pleasantly drowsy, it felt like a normal day.

Andrew blew out a thick stream of smoke and asked, “So what should we do for lunch?”
Chapter Summary

Something on the news catches Andrew's attention.

Chapter Notes

Robin Cross is from Nora's extra content on her tumblr and so is the "Andrew hears it on the news" setup. I take no credit.

Valentine's Day didn't mean anything to Neil, but it meant a lot to Nicky. Usually his video calls with Erik took place in the odd hours when Neil, Andrew, and Kevin were all in class or at the court, but on Valentine's Day Nicky locked himself in the bedroom after they got back from afternoon practice and the other three were left to find ways to block out the noise. Kevin had his headphones and his own laptop. Due to some renovations in the library as well as the Valentine's and anti-Valentine's Day parties happening in the basement of the Tower, Neil was without any appealing options for a place to finish the coursework that was due the next day.

Neil sat on the floor of the main room with his work spread out around him. Beside him, Andrew sank into a beanbag chair with a bag of pretzels and turned up the volume of the television. To Neil's distracted mind, it was all just white noise that was sometimes interrupted by a particularly loud moan from the bedroom that he tried to ignore.

As usual, Neil's focus was split between his schoolwork and Exy. Spring championships were underway and the Foxes were doing better than he expected. The freshmen were finally hitting their stride and meshing well with the rest of the team. On Sunday, he'd crossed paths with Lizzy while they were both out on their morning runs. They had a short chat during their cool-down walk and he'd learned from her that Holly had been dragging those of the underclassmen that played defense to the court for extra drills. Apparently, Holly's aggression and skill on the court and stony silence off of it made her intimidating enough that the underclassmen followed her lead without much fuss. Neil was privately thrilled to hear that Holly was putting her court keys to good use.

Andrew bounced a pretzel off Neil's temple. “Stop drawing plays on your homework.”

Grumbling, Neil popped the fallen pretzel into his mouth and tried to turn his mind back to statistics. Another noise came from the bedroom and Neil tried even harder to focus on the numbers in front of him instead of what was going on behind the locked door.

He was three-quarters of the way through the packet when Andrew suddenly shifted forward and set his bag of pretzels aside. Neil glanced up from his work and froze when he saw the way Andrew was watching the television. Something had caught his attention.

Onscreen, a woman was reporting on the story of a man named Stephen McCarthy, who had been wanted for years for several counts of kidnapping and homicide among other things. He was apprehended earlier that evening after he attempted to cross the Canadian border with his latest
victim and poorly forged papers. The reporter went on to say that the victim, a girl named Kelsey Peterson, was uninjured and on her way to be reunited with her family. Neil couldn't make sense of why Andrew was so intrigued, so he kept listening.

Stephen McCarthy was born and raised in New Jersey and there was no mention of him ever going to California or South Carolina where Andrew might have crossed paths with him. McCarthy's victims were all young girls abducted from playgrounds or shopping centers and kept for a few years until they were too old to keep his interest.

As the woman spoke, Andrew curled forward in his beanbag chair until he was crouched on the floor, eyes still fixated to the screen.

“Andrew?” Neil asked quietly.

“Later,” Andrew muttered as he got to his feet.

Neil stared after him as he slipped into his shoes and jacket. He stuffed his keys into his pocket and left without so much as a backward glance.

Kevin turned toward him and pulled his headphones off one ear to ask, “Where's he going?”

Neil shrugged. “Have you ever heard of Stephen McCarthy?”

Kevin shook his head and swiveled fully around in his chair to face Neil. His headphones slipped down around his neck. “Maybe he's just going out for ice cream.”

“We have ice cream,” Neil pointed out. He didn't say that it was unlikely for Andrew to leave them behind, but he knew Kevin was thinking it, too. It wasn't unheard of for Andrew to slip off on his own for some peace and quiet, but the way Andrew had reacted to the news story made Neil intensely curious. For something to catch Andrew Minyard's attention it must have been important.

He hated not knowing things- especially when they concerned Andrew. Kevin looked equally uncomfortable. After the few years they spent locked safely in each other's company, there wasn't much they didn't know about one another. Neil almost couldn't recall what exactly it felt like holding all his secrets inside his lungs before becoming a Fox, before he was truly known.

So who the hell was Stephen McCarthy and what was his connection to Andrew?

It was easy, with Andrew's past, to assume the worst. Even if Andrew didn't fit McCarthy's reported preferences, McCarthy was similar enough to the men who preyed on Andrew when he was younger. Neil spent a few dark moments wondering if Uncle Stuart had any connections inside New Jersey State Prison, where McCarthy would no doubt wind up.

“He'll be back later,” Kevin said, like he was commanding it rather than guessing, before he turned to his laptop and put his headphones back over his ears. Neil sighed and slumped sideways into Andrew's abandoned beanbag for a few minutes, staring at the five-day forecast that was now displayed on the television.

Eventually, Nicky's noises got louder and frequent enough that Neil couldn't stand it any longer. He hurriedly finished up the last few problems, slipped into his coat and shoes, and then escaped up to the roof.

He lay on his back and checked his phone. There were the usual text messages from the underclassmen. Brook invited him out for coffee in a way that gave Neil the impression she wanted to talk to him about something in particular. Lizzy sent him something incoherent and confusing.
Judging by the equally senseless message from Brian, he guessed they were spending the holiday drinking together. He sent a quick text to Colby telling him to give his inebriated friends plenty of water. Eddie wished him a happy V-Day and asked if he had any spare condoms. Neil didn’t respond to that.

There was nothing from Andrew and the silence weighed heavily on him.


A reply came immediately. *Life tip: don’t spend V-Day w/ someone you've been with less than six months.*

Neil frowned down at the words and jumped when the phone chimed with an incoming call. He hit the green button and lifted the phone to his ear. “Thanks for life tip, but I don't know if I'll need it.”

“So I went on two dates with this guy Darren a couple weeks ago,” Allison began, “and this fucker thinks he's going to take me out tonight. Like, what the actual hell?”

“I didn't realize Valentine's Day was so complicated.”

“We didn't talk once about Valentine's- we haven’t talked at all in a week, actually- and then this morning he sends me fucking flowers. Roses, Neil. Big ones.”

Wryly, Neil asked, “So where'd you hide the body?”

*“He booked a suite at a hotel, too, and he didn't even bother to ask if I want to fuck him yet.”*

“Where should we hide the body?”

*“Ha, I'm sure you and your boy will figure something out. Ugh, I hate dating and getting to know people. It's so tedious in the beginning.”*

Neil's throat knotted around Seth's name. Idly, he wondered if Seth and Allison would have been engaged or married by now if things had been different, if he had done things differently. It was incredibly strange picturing Allison dating someone else even though it had been years since Seth died. Neil tried to imagine dating someone other than Andrew, slowly getting to know another person and being intimate with them. He couldn't. In fact, it made him feel ill to think of a different pair of hands on his body and a different mouth pressed to his.

He cleared his throat. “Are you staying in tonight, then?”

*“I went to dinner alone, actually. It was less depressing in theory.”*

“Oh. Was it good food at least?”

*“I ate like a king. I'm surprised the zipper on my dress held out.”* Allison’s laugh crackled in his ear. *“It sucks that I have to actually go out and exercise on my own. Cardio's no fun without Dan yelling at me.”*

“She should record motivational tapes or something,” Neil said with a small laugh of his own. “I'm going to need something for the rookies once Kevin's not around anymore.”

*“Are they behaving?”*

*“Not really.”*
Allison snorted. “Good. Gotta keep the tradition alive.”

Neil startled when the doorknob rattled across the roof. He glanced over his shoulder as the door scraped open and Andrew stepped out.

“Uh, I should probably go,” Neil said with a hint of regret. It’d been three weeks since he last had a proper conversation with Allison.

“Yeah, yeah, have fun with Andrew, you lovesick nerd,” Allison teased. There was a click and then the call went dead. Allison didn't usually bother hello's or good-bye's and sometimes it felt as if all their conversations were part of one long ongoing discussion, which Neil sort of liked.

Andrew dropped a package of chocolate-covered peanuts on Neil's lap before settling down beside him and pulling out his cigarettes. Neil watched him light up and waited for him to break the silence. If Andrew wanted to talk, he'd talk.

After Andrew handed Neil's cigarette over and took a pull off his own, he said, “We're going to Newark over spring break.”

Neil blinked in surprise, but he couldn't find a reason to protest. The Foxes didn't have any group trips planned until the summer anyway since Nicky wanted to go to Germany and Dan's school had a different week off for break.

“Sure,” he said. “We'll go to Newark. Is there something there you want to see or did you just throw a dart at a map?”

“We're signing someone who lives there.”

Neil felt like Andrew had started at the wrong end of the explanation. “They have a name?”

“Robin Cross.”

It took a moment before the name registered in Neil's memory. Robin Cross had been mentioned briefly on the news, an unfortunate entry in the list of Stephen McCarthy's victims. Neil couldn't remember what else was said about her, though. Andrew obviously knew who she was since he knew where she lived and that she played Exy.

Andrew stared at him hard like he was waiting for Neil to raise objections just so he could swat them down.

“Does Coach know we're signing Robin Cross?” Neil asked.

Andrew replied, “I left him a note.”

“You broke into his apartment.”

Andrew lifted a shoulder. “He wasn't home. Probably off playing doctor with our nurse.”

Neil tilted his head and squinted at him. It was well after dark and he knew the front gate of Wymack's apartment complex would be closed by now. “Did you climb over the fence?”

“Like you haven't climbed fences in your lifetime?”

“Not lately,” Neil grumbled before circling back to a question he had. “So is Robin any good?”

“I don't know.”
“What position does she play?”

Andrew only shrugged again and said, “I don't know.”

“Do you know what high school she goes to?”

“Probably one in Newark.”

Neil shook his head and gave a small laugh. He wasn’t surprised in the least that Andrew didn’t give a damn about this person’s Exy stats or team. There was something about her that Andrew did give a damn about, though, and that was enough for Neil.

Whoever Robin Cross was, Neil was already looking forward to meeting her.
A Disappointing End

Chapter Summary

Matt and Kevin play their last game as Foxes.

The Foxes' season ended after a death-match in Nevada. They hadn't even made it to semifinals. There was no use fighting the sharp sting of disappointment as Neil looked from Matt to Kevin, who had both just finished their last game as Foxes. They both had bright futures ahead of them, of course- Kevin had already secured a contract with the Houston Sirens and Matt recently had a promising round of interviews with the owner and general managers of the Philadelphia Bobcats.

Neil still felt nauseated as he shook hands with their opponents. He allowed himself a few moments of crippling self-pity before he pulled himself together enough to put on a neutral expression for the rest of the Foxes who were looking to him now for reassurance.

“You'll get 'em next year,” Matt said, clapping Neil's shoulder as they headed off the court.

Neil's smile was twitchy and forced, but Matt didn't comment on it.

In the locker room, Kevin said in French, “The last game was just as disappointing as the first, but there were satisfying ones in between.”

It was oddly comforting. Neil huffed out a laugh and replied, “Watch, we'll go all the way to finals next year without your lazy ass dragging us down.”

Kevin slid him a superior look, but there was a little tug at the corner of his mouth. “I will be watching, so you better.”

After Wymack's abrupt speech about how the Foxes fought well, Neil and Kevin went out to speak to the reporters. The questions were more aggravating than usual, but thankfully Kevin answered most of them. Everyone's attention was more focused on him anyway. They were all eager to know about the son of Exy's future plans. Neil was just eager to get out of there and back to the hotel.

The parking lot was filled with energetic fans and disgruntled security guards trying to keep the crowds under control as the Foxes plodded out to the rental vans. A bottle sailed over their heads and shattered on the pavement. Someone took a swing at a guard. Andrew slipped his hand into Neil's and pulled him closer as the crowds swelled and more fights broke out.

At the hotel, Matt announced that he and Nicky were going to walk to the nearest liquor store and buy their combined weight in booze. “Any freshman that wants to drink has to help carry shit back,” he added, grinning at the groans he got in reply. Nicky poked his head into Aaron and Kevin's room to see if they wanted anything out of the ordinary before he headed out with Matt, followed by the flock of grumbling freshmen.

Neil wanted nothing more than to burrow under the thick comforter and maybe a few pillows for the rest of the night, but he was the team captain and his team had just suffered a crushing loss, so he stood in the hallway between the cluster of rooms the Foxes were inhabiting for the night. He offered bleak words of encouragement to Brian and Colby as they passed him on their way to the
vending machines. Jack and Sheena pointedly ignored him as they walked by. Jack wore swim trunks and Sheena's dark bikini top showed through her thin white t-shirt, so Neil didn't need to ask where they were going.

Brook stepped out of her room a few minutes later, lip clamped between her teeth and eyes anxious. She looked like she was bracing herself for something and it was a look she'd worn more and more over the last few weeks. There was obviously something weighing on her mind, but every time she looked ready to bring it up with Neil she lost her nerve and changed the subject.

Beside him, the door handle turned downward and the heavy door pulled open. Andrew emerged, flicking a look between the two of them, and then he tapped two fingers to his temple once. Alone, he headed for the stairwell at the end of the hall. For a moment, Neil considered going after him to share cigarettes and a silence that was more comfortable than this one.

Instead he stayed and asked, “Everything okay, Brook?”

She forced out a huge breath and abruptly began, “So you're dating someone on the team.”

Neil blinked in surprise. “Dating” didn't seem like the right word for what he and Andrew had. He didn't argue, though, he just nodded for her to continue.

“I don't know how to go about it without it being weird, you know? If we fought or broke up or something it'd fuck up the team vibe, wouldn't it? And I wouldn't want to risk that. I really like being on this team and even though we bombed hard tonight-”

“We didn't bomb that hard,” Neil interjected. They'd only lost by a few points, after all.

“I feel like we're finally getting things right. It was weird last year, but this year's been better and I want us to keep getting better. I'm just worried that dating someone on the team will jeopardize that.”

Neil swallowed and looked around for signs of anyone else. Matt and Nicky would have been able to give her better advice, but they weren't back yet. He vividly remembered the day he stood by her hospital bed feeling like he'd failed her in a large way.

“That's, uh, that's a valid concern.” He floundered for a moment, struggling to find the right words. “Honestly, the Foxes will probably never run smoothly. Shit's always going to happen, but we know how to deal with it. If something goes wrong with you two and it messes with the team then we'll handle it as a team.”

The tension seeped out of her shoulders and she stared hard at the carpet at her feet. “Yeah,” she said quietly. Then, she straightened up and looked him in the eye. “Thanks, Neil.”

“Sure,” he said awkwardly.

Thankfully, another door opened and Kevin stepped into the hall. “Are they back yet?”

They didn't have to wait long before Matt and Nicky returned with the freshmen and the booze. The drinking began immediately. Doors were propped open and music leaked into the hallway at a somewhat reasonable volume. Neil wandered into Matt and Nicky's room and stood against the wall. Matt brought him a beer and tapped his own plastic cup against it before they drank together in silence. Soon the sting of their loss was soothed away by alcohol and the Foxes were back to laughing and bickering like nothing had gone wrong that night.

“Just 'cause our season's over, doesn't mean you're free of me just yet, Cap'n,” Matt teased, eyes
bright and smile huge. “I'm still gonna be at practices to make sure you guys stay in line until the year's out. Dan made me promise.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Damn. I thought I was done with you.”

Matt nudged him with his elbow and Neil nudged back. He could already feel the ache of losing Matt and Kevin building in his chest, but he also knew that he wasn't really losing them. They would text and call and visit just like the girls did. They would no longer be Foxes, but they would always be family.

Neil knew the change would hurt, but he also knew they would all be okay.

An hour later, Nicky had one arm around Brook's shoulders while he showed her pictures of Erik on his phone. Lizzy and Brian competed to see who could carry Colby the longest, which got in the way of Colby's drunken mission to photograph everyone's shoes. Holly and Aaron stood together in the middle of the hallway, locked in a heated debate about healthcare that derailed slowly as they got more and more drunk. Kevin took a short phone call and then he snagged a bottle of vodka on his way out of the room without so much as a good-bye. Neil leaned out into the hallway and watched him step onto the elevator, wondering why he wasn't staying on their floor.

“Thea's here,” Andrew said, making Neil jump. He hadn't seen Andrew since he went off to smoke.

“Oh,” Neil replied.

They stared at each other, momentarily forgetting their drunk teammates and Kevin's vanishing act. Neil had indulged in a second beer, which left him feeling warm and softened around the edges, and Andrew had a plastic cup with a couple inches of whiskey.

Neil was perfectly aware of the large, comfortable bed laying empty in their room. It was a well-known rule of college dating that a bed and a private room should never go to waste, but Neil didn't feel any rush to hurry back with Andrew just yet. He didn't need to greedily hoard moments and hold on with all his might.

They had time and they had each other. They would always have each other.

Andrew seemed to understand because he finished his drink and slipped back into Matt and Nicky's room for more. Neil followed and let himself get roped into a discussion between Matt and Brian about performance art. Colby sidled up to Brian's side with a video clip ready on his phone and an enthusiasm for the topic that surprised Neil. Out in the hall, Lizzy tried to teach Nicky how to waltz. Both of them were almost too drunk to stand upright and their guffawing was louder than Matt's music. Brook stood against the wall, watching and laughing at the pair of them until Wymack stepped out of his room and told them all to pipe down.

The most surprising thing that night was the glimpse Neil caught of Andrew and Aaron speaking to each other in a doorway. Both wore the same calm expression, mirror images of apathy, but the simple fact that they were exchanging words at all meant something. They only spoke for a few minutes before Aaron left, probably to get Katelyn from the floor above where the Vixens were staying since Kevin wouldn't be back to the room anytime soon. Andrew caught Neil's eye meaningfully just before he left Matt and Nicky's room to head back over to theirs.

Midnight had come and gone and they had a flight to catch in eight hours. Neil wished the others a good night even though they were too far gone to really notice at that point. Then, he followed Andrew back into the hushed quiet of their room.
He could feel Andrew staring at him as they got ready for bed, but neither of them felt the need to speak until they were under the covers in the dark.

“Are you saving the mental breakdown for the flight home?” Andrew asked dryly, voice rumbling with fatigue and the lingering effect of alcohol.

Neil shifted against the thick pillows and joked, “You'll need the distraction.”

“Neil.”

Neil swallowed and sobered. “It was Kevin and Matt's last game and I... I wasn't ready for it to be over so soon.”

“Would you have ever been ready?”

“I guess not,” Neil grumbled.

“Well, start bracing yourself because next year-”

“I know,” Neil cut him off harshly. He didn't want to think about that right now. He didn't know if he'd ever reach a point where the thought of Andrew leaving PSU wouldn't make his throat hot and tight. He curled up on his half of the bed and squeezed his eyes shut, trying to push down the sudden spike of dread in his chest.

Andrew's fingers traced over the scars on his cheek, finding them easily as they'd done so many times over the last few years. The tip of Andrew's forefinger dragged down the slightly crooked slant of his nose and then brushed over his lips. Instinctively, Neil pressed a small kiss to Andrew's fingertip.

He felt the mattress dip before Andrew's mouth found his. Andrew's body heat soothed away the chilly feeling in Neil's heart. With steady hands, Andrew pushed Neil onto his back and Neil's curled, tense body unfolded easily beneath him. After the exhausting game and the alcohol, they were pliant and loose-limbed, trading sighs and slow kisses that tasted faintly of toothpaste. Andrew rested some of his weight on Neil, pinning him in the present moment, and Neil tangled his fingers in Andrew's hair to keep him close. Time was slipping away from them- they had just over a year before their paths diverged- but they refused to hurry through this. They kissed like they had all the time in the world until sleep claimed them.
Going South

Chapter Summary

The boys go back to Columbia.

Chapter Notes

I kind of took a leap with Aaron's character here, so I hope you guys don't mind

As always, thank you all so much for reading! I really appreciate it :)

Also, there's explicit sex at the end of this one so be warned

The trip to Columbia was Kevin's idea. He wanted a distraction from either their disappointing defeat the week before or the pressure of his upcoming interview with the general managers of the US national team. No matter what Kevin's reasons might have been, the other agreed easily to a night out. Nicky wanted to put some distance between himself and an exam that had gone badly. Aaron was bored since Katelyn was busy.

It didn't really matter to Neil if they went somewhere or stayed at the Tower and Andrew didn't care either, so off they went.

As he settled into the passenger seat, Neil tried to keep a positive attitude instead of brooding over the fact that they would have been at the court for a game that night if they hadn't been knocked out of spring championships. He stared out the window while Andrew guided the car onto the highway and thought that perhaps he'd indulge in a bit of alcohol later to dull his gloomy thoughts.

After fifteen minutes, Neil didn't need to try so hard to keep himself distracted because Aaron and Nicky got into a loud argument in the backseat. It was their third argument that week and, just like the previous ones, it sounded lopsided due to Aaron's anger and Nicky's flippancy.

The trouble started when Erik said he couldn't afford to join the Foxes on their trip to Hawaii that summer because of some costly car repairs. Katelyn wouldn't be coming along with them either since she'd already agreed to go to Canada with her family. The two cousins would both be without their significant others and Aaron was oddly annoyed at Nicky for turning down Neil's offer to pay for Erik's ticket.

"You're going to mope the whole time," Aaron complained. "You could use your money to go to Germany instead. It's not a big deal."

Nicky playfully shoved his head and said, "Don't say that. I want to go to Hawaii with you guys. Besides, I saw Erik over spring break. It's fine."

The last word broke on the way out of Nicky's mouth. He flashed a weak smile when he saw Neil
looking back at him.

“Could you guys wait until we're not squashed together in a car to have this fight?” Kevin asked in a bored tone.

“Feel free to jump out any time,” Aaron snapped before returning his attention to his cousin. “Just let Neil buy Erik a ticket. Neil doesn't give a fuck about his money.”

“It's fine, really,” Nicky said with a dismissive gesture.

“Why are you being such a stubborn asshole?”

“New topic,” Nicky announced loudly. “Neil, how'd you do on your essay?”

Aaron was glaring at him, but Neil responded anyway. “I did fine.”

Frigid silence ensued.

At Sweetie's, Aaron stewed in his irritation and Nicky peppered Kevin with questions about the places he'd traveled to before he came to Palmetto State just to keep some sort of conversation going. Neil knew most of it already thanks to his obsession with Kevin and Riko when he was younger, so he tuned them out and watched people feign nonchalance as they took packets of crackers from the bucket at the salad bar. At a nearby booth, a waitress was pocketing the small stack of twenties someone left behind as payment for cracker dust. While Neil was distracted, Andrew stole his ice cream. Neil didn't really mind.

After they were done eating, they headed over to Eden's Twilight, where the music and the crowd was loud enough to smother the awkwardness lingering between Nicky and Aaron. Neil followed Andrew up to the bar and the crowd pressed in around them, everyone eager to get a bartender's attention. Neil held his ground against them as best he could until Andrew hooked one finger in Neil's belt loop and tugged him forward. He maneuvered them around so that Neil had his back to the bar with Andrew's arms caging him in. Neil grinned, but Andrew ignored him.

By the time they made it back to their table with the tray of drinks, Aaron and Nicky had disappeared. Kevin sat alone with his arms folded grumpily and said that he'd sent them off to bicker in private. Andrew slid a look towards Neil.

“I'll find them,” Neil sighed, leaving Andrew and Kevin to start on their drinks.

He walked along the platform overlooking the dance floor. There was no sign of Nicky and Aaron in any of the nearby alcoves or on the dance floor. Neil checked the bathrooms next. When he didn't find them there either, he continued to wander in search of any other spots they could have gone to for privacy. He made it to some far corner of the club he'd never been to before when he happened upon a short hallway that turned to the right at the end. He heard the *fwump* of swinging doors before a woman dressed in black rounded the corner with a tub of clean glasses. She swept past Neil without a second glance at him and, a few seconds later, Nicky's voice came from around the corner.

“It's our last summer together, Aaron,” Nicky said wearily. “Could you at least pretend you give a shit? Just once?”

“I don't see what that has to do with anything. I don't understand why you won't just ask Neil to pay for Erik's ticket.”

“And I don't understand why you're making such a fuss about this. I know you've always hated him
and I know you hate seeing us together.”

“It's not- I don't-”

“Don't try to deny it,” Nicky cut in like a knife. “You've been giving me shit for years and I've put up with it, but you don't get to act like you don't have a problem with me and Erik.”

From his spot around the corner, Neil could feel the tension thickening in the air.

Finally, Aaron said, “If you were straight, you wouldn't have gone to Germany.”

“What?” Nicky asked. “I don't understand.”

“If you were straight,” Aaron repeated, stronger this time, “you would've been there when I actually needed you. You wouldn't have gone to Germany because you wouldn't have needed a way out.”

Nicky was quiet for a long time. For a moment, Neil thought it was all over, but then Aaron kept going.

“Mom didn't look at me unless I was screaming at her and then it was just so she'd know where to aim. When Andrew moved in, he was more interested in being a detective than my brother. He picked and picked until he figured my shit out.” Aaron sucked in a rattling breath. “I thought things might get better with Mom- you know, fresh start out here and we had Andrew with us finally- but then she was dead and any chance we had was gone. Then, I thought things would be better once we moved in with you, but they weren't.”

“Aaron,” Nicky sighed.

“You wouldn't shut up about how great Erik was and how awesome your life in Germany was. It was all sunshine and fucking rainbows with you and I... I don't know if I was still trying punish you for leaving or trying to get that phony smile to crack. I didn't know anything I said mattered to you.”

“Aaron.”

“Don't worry, Erik already ripped me a new one for it.”

“Last summer?”

“Yeah.”

Neil had almost forgotten about that. During the Foxes' vacation last summer, Erik and Aaron disappeared together for an hour to buy booze and talk. Neil never figured out just what it was that Erik had ended up saying to him.

“I was supposed to be taking care of you,” Nicky said numbly. “I didn't want to be another adult that dumped their issues on you and let you down. That's why I never said anything.”

Neil scraped his teeth over his bottom lip and glanced toward the dark end of the hallway. Noise from the club was washing in and he knew Andrew would be wondering what was taking him so long. He turned to leave, but froze at what he heard next.

“Katelyn and I are getting married.”

“What? When?” Nicky sounded as surprised as Neil felt.
“After we graduate.”

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah, I mean, that's the plan anyway. We want to get married before we go to med school.” Aaron paused to cough awkwardly. “So, uh, you don't have to worry about holding me up anymore. I'm all right.”

“That's... that's so great, Aaron.” Nicky gave a watery laugh. “I can't believe you're getting married before me, you little asshole.”

Neil smiled a little and walked away. He didn't care much for Aaron, but Nicky's desperation to hold onto family was something Neil understood perfectly.

Back at the table, Kevin was well on his way to being completely drunk and Andrew was nursing a glass of whiskey. He lifted an eyebrow at Neil when he caught sight of him coming up the stairs off the dance floor. Neil returned his look with a tight smile.

“They're just talking,” he said after he took his seat next to Andrew.

“Too long enough,” Andrew replied. “Eavesdropping, were you?”

Neil shrugged and picked up the nearest shot glass to tip the drink into his mouth. Andrew nudged another one closer, but Neil shook his head and said, “I don't want to get drunk tonight.”

“Big plans later?” Andrew drawled.

“Someone thinks highly of himself.”

“Ugh,” Kevin groaned from across the table. “Use Russian if you're gonna talk dirty.”

Neil was full of something, something good and warm. He didn't know if it was because of Nicky's breakthrough with Aaron or the way Andrew's eyes looked almost amused in the tricky lights of the club, but he wanted to spend the night buried in that feeling. His need to be closer to Andrew was like an itch he couldn't ignore.

Andrew seemed to notice. He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes slightly.

“Yes or no?” Neil asked, leaning closer.

Andrew put two fingers on Neil's forehead and pushed him back into his seat. “Later.”

“Yeah?”

Andrew propped his chin up with his fist and looked at Neil coolly without an answer. The flicker of heat in his gaze set Neil's veins on fire. Later, he reminded himself.

Nicky and Aaron returned just in time to stop Kevin from downing their portions of the drinks. Neil sipped water as they threw back shots rapidly to make up for lost time. They didn't speak much, but the mood was noticeably lighter. After a second round, Aaron and Nicky went down to the dance floor together and disappeared in the crowd for long periods of time, only resurfacing when they needed more alcohol.

Kevin drank until the tension melted from his shoulders and his face was flushed. He poked at the screen of his phone- scrolling through text messages, it looked like.
Neil looked back at Andrew and, for once, he wasn't afraid of their impending separation. Thinking of Aaron's future plans made Neil think of the life he would get to share with Andrew, the future they'd earned after all their suffering. They could get an apartment- or two, even- and wherever they went would feel like home as long as they were together.

“You're staring,” Andrew said blandly.

“I like staring.”

“I've noticed.”

“You like it, too,” Neil teased.

Andrew arched an eyebrow, but he couldn't hide how his eyes darkened.

And just like that, Neil's contentment melted into hot arousal. It wasn't long before his jeans were a bit uncomfortable. He shifted in his seat and Andrew caught on immediately, but he didn't act on it.

They were both willing to wait.

It was a torturous hour before the other three were finally ready to leave Eden's Twilight. Andrew helped Kevin stay upright while they made their way out of the club. Aaron and Nicky both leaned on each other for support, which seemed like a bad idea, so Neil walked a couple paces behind them just in case they collapsed.

They reached the house in no time and, once the Maserati was parked, it was a short struggle herding the three drunken men into the house. Nicky toddled off to his own room while Neil hauled Kevin to the couch. Andrew had to half-carry Aaron up the stairs since Aaron had hit the booze a little harder than usual that night.

With a pounding heart, Neil quickly used the bathroom and brushed his teeth before darting into Andrew's bedroom to wait. His excitement kept his fatigue at bay. He paced the length of the room a few times and dragged his hands through his hair, eager for whatever was about to happen.

His heart jumped when the door opened and Andrew stepped inside. Heat washed over his skin. His cock twitched before Andrew reached him. His hands clutched at Neil's hips, drawing him in closer for a bruising kiss.

“Yes or no?” Neil whispered, nipping the corner of Andrew's slick mouth.

“Yes,” Andrew whispered back.

Neil brushed his lips against Andrew's neck and admitted lowly, “I want you to fuck me.”

Andrew pulled back to look him in the eye, searching. The other three members of their group were passed out in various corners of the house and they weren't likely to wake up even if there were some loud noises, but maybe the risk wasn't worth it. Maybe Andrew wasn't comfortable.

Just when he was about to open his mouth to try to take it back, Andrew licked his lips and asked, “Can you be quiet?”

Neil nodded and then Andrew pushed him back toward the bed. Neil tugged off his clothes while he scrambled back onto the mattress. Andrew took off his armbands and long-sleeved shirt before digging the bottle of lube out of the nightstand drawer. Laying back on his elbows, Neil swept an
appreciative glance over Andrew's chest and admired the contrast between his pale belly and the black waistband of his jeans.

Andrew crawled onto the mattress to kneel between Neil's bent legs. Neil stuffed a pillow under his hips and then lay flat on his back while Andrew slicked his fingers up with lube.

Andrew paused and looked up at him. “Yes?”

“Yeah,” Neil whispered. He pulled his knees toward his chest for easier access. Andrew wrapped one hand around Neil's cock while he slowly slid a finger inside him. Pleasure quickly melted his belly and put his thoughts in a humid fog. There was a slight sting as Andrew stretched him enough to take a second, then a third finger, but Neil found it sharpened his arousal. His chest felt swollen and tight; his breathing grew rapid and harsh. It was a struggle to keep the noises back, but he was successful at it.

“Still good?” Andrew murmured, watching Neil closely.

Neil nodded and swallowed another moan.

“Neil.”

Neil hummed a little in acknowledgment and reached a hand out to the nightstand. He groped blindly at the drawer until his hand found the stash of condoms. One was tossed to Andrew along with a, “It's still yes.”

Andrew's fingers were slippery with lube and they fumbled with the foil packet for a moment before Andrew lost his patience. He pinched one corner between his teeth and tore it open carefully. Neil took a few deep, steadying breaths while Andrew rolled the condom on.

Andrew pushed into him smoothly and, overwhelmed, Neil choked out a groan.

Andrew's hand slapped over his mouth and shoved his head hard into pillow as he hissed, “Shut up.”

Neil tensed and blinked in surprise. Dark anger passed over Andrew's face as his mind went somewhere else. Then, the shadow cleared and left behind vague shock and panic. Andrew tore himself away from Neil and stumbled away from the bed. He ripped off the condom and hurled it toward the wastebasket with a furious scowl. Neil watched him snatch his clothes off the floor with a sinking feeling in his stomach. Andrew had startled himself with his own forcefulness. It veered too close to the stuff of his nightmares, to the men Andrew swore he'd never be like.

“Andrew?” Neil called quietly. He could see how badly Andrew's hands were shaking as he struggled to pull on his underwear and jeans.

“We need to go,” Andrew snapped. “Get dressed.”

Neil shot to his feet and went for his discarded jeans and t-shirt. As soon as they were dressed, they darted out of the bedroom and stole down the stairs. They stuffed their feet into their shoes, Andrew grabbed his keys from the little table by the door, and they rushed out to the driveway.

A few minutes later, the Maserati was tearing out of the neighborhood onto the main road. The tires squealed in protest as Andrew turned too fast. They sped through the streets of Columbia until they reached the highway. Neil didn't look at the signs, had no idea where Andrew was taking them, but he didn't really care. All that mattered was that they put distance between themselves and the ugly thought that struck Andrew back at the house.
Neil watched the city lights shrink in the side mirror as the car careened deeper into the night. Traffic grew lighter the farther they traveled until at last they were alone on the road.

“Andrew,” he tried.

“Not yet,” Andrew murmured.

Neil settled into his seat and kept quiet.

Fifteen minutes later, Andrew slowed down and pulled the Maserati into the wide shoulder. The car rocked to a halt. Andrew threw off his seat belt and flung himself out into the night air. Neil got out as well, looking down the long purple-gray ribbon of highway for oncoming traffic. There was no one.

Nervous energy hummed in Neil's veins as he stood beside Andrew up against the passenger side of the Maserati, staring out into the shaggy field of weeds and wildflowers. Andrew ran his hands through his hair over and over again.

“Andrew?” Neil asked quietly.

Andrew's hands were shaking. “I just didn't want them hearing.”

“I know,” Neil said. “You surprised me a little. That's all. I'm okay.”

Andrew took a deep breath and looked at him. “Is it no?”


Andrew dragged him into a rough kiss, breathing life into the dimmed embers of their arousal. Renewed heat spread through Neil's body and cleared away his chilly uncertainty. With his hands twisting in Neil's shirt, Andrew turned and shoved him up against the side of the car. Neil could taste a wild spark of urgency on Andrew's tongue as it pushed into his mouth.

Andrew bit Neil's bottom lip once, just hard enough to leave it stinging, and then ducked down to lick the base of Neil's throat. Neil clutched Andrew's shoulders and moaned softly into his hair. He was already achingly hard in his jeans, so he rolled his hips against Andrew's in hopes that he'd understand because his tongue wasn't cooperating.

“Tell me what you want,” said Andrew.

Neil was breathless and dizzy and certain he'd slip off the earth's surface entirely if Andrew let him go. Andrew's breath was puffing against his damp, bruising skin. His body was solid and hot against Neil's. What did Neil want? Everything.

“Neil,” Andrew prompted.

“Fuck me.”

Andrew's silence made Neil look back down at him. For a moment, Andrew searched his face in the dark. Then, he looked down the highway and checked for lights. There were none. They were completely alone under the stars.

“Yes or no?” Andrew mumbled.

Neil dragged kisses across Andrew's cheek. “Yes.”
“I have stuff in the trunk. Hold on.” He pried Neil's hands away from his shirt and, with a steadiness that Neil envied, he opened the car door and crawled across the center console to pop the trunk. Boneless, Neil tried to catch his breath and undo his jeans at the same time while Andrew went to fetch a condom. Neil's fingers were useless. His thoughts were erratic.

When Andrew was standing in front of him again, he huffed in annoyance and batted Neil's hands away from his waistband so he could undo the button and zipper himself. Then, he knelt and removed Neil's shoes. He tugged Neil's jeans and briefs down to his ankles so Neil could step out of them.

Andrew stood up and reached behind Neil to slide two fingers into his ass. Neil grabbed Andrew's arms to steady himself and swallowed a groan.

“Tell me if it hurts,” Andrew murmured against Neil's shoulder as he slid in a third finger. It was easy considering they'd just done this half an hour ago. He curled his middle finger against Neil's prostate, sending a hot spark through Neil's core, before withdrawing completely.

“Just fuck me already,” Neil begged.

Andrew shut him up with a hard kiss as he fumbled with the button and zipper of his own jeans. He took a condom out of his pocket before shoving his jeans and boxers halfway down his thighs. As Neil watched him roll the condom on, it occurred to him he didn't know how exactly they were going to do this.

“Uh, Andrew?”

“Hold onto my shoulders,” Andrew instructed.

Neil frowned at him, but obeyed. He let out a strange yelp of surprise when Andrew suddenly hooked his arms under Neil's knees and lifted him easily. One of Neil's arms slammed back against the Maserati when he felt like he was sliding, but the other hand stayed firmly clamped to Andrew's shoulder.


Andrew jostled him a little so that his ass was aligned with Andrew's groin. Then, Andrew said, “You're going to have to give me a hand here, Neil.”

It was clumsy at first, but Neil was able to guide Andrew's tip inside him. Andrew thrust halfway in with a grunt and Neil's body went rigid with pleasure. His mouth fell open and his toes curled. It was almost frightening at first, the feeling of being held off the ground while Andrew fucked into him. After the first few moments, though, anything remotely close to fear was swept away by the pleasure crackling through Neil's body. Andrew was in complete control and Neil trusted him not to falter.

“Let me hear you,” Andrew growled roughly into his neck.

Neil's stomach clenched hard. He curved one hand around the back of Andrew's head and let out a shaky sigh. Andrew snapped his hips upward at a new angle and startled a loud, breathy moan out of him.


“That's what- ugh- I'm doing, Neil.”
Neil groaned his name again, tilting back against the car as Andrew sped up. Sweat gathered between Andrew's arms and Neil's knees, it beaded along the back of Neil's neck, and it slipped down under his collar. Andrew's breaths were harsh and choppy as he fucked him with reckless force. Neil's back ached from knocking back into the metal, but he could barely feel the pain through the pleasure of it all.

"Holy shit," Neil gasped. Everything in his body was curling, blooming, burning.

"Touch yourself," Andrew whispered. "I won't drop you."

A loud grunt punched out of Neil's lungs. Slowly, he let go of the car and pulled at Andrew's hair with one hand while he wrapped the other around himself. A few harsh strokes later, he was shuddering and crying out as his orgasm blew his senses apart. Andrew grunted something in response to Neil's wordless moan and then his hips stuttered.

"Oh, fuck," Andrew grit out, clenching his eyes shut as he came.

Andrew stayed pressed inside Neil while he caught his breath. Neil's lungs were scraped raw and his mind was full of light. Pain and pleasure warred within his body, leaving him empty and exhausted and thoroughly satisfied. Neil could feel Andrew's arms shaking as they slowly came down from their highs.

"Andrew," Neil mumbled, tugging at his hair.

Andrew blew out a harsh breath and then lowered Neil's legs, trembling from the effort. As soon as Neil's feet touched the gravel, his knees buckled and Andrew pinned him to the car to keep him upright until he could stand on his own. Neil's legs were still shaking, but he was able to pull his clothes and shoes back on without tipping over. Andrew tied off the condom and tossed it into the field before righting his own clothing.

"Do you want to drive us back or should I?" Neil asked.

"I'm not going to do all the work, Neil."

Chapter End Notes

(please don't throw used condoms in fields)
Neil counted down the days until Matt and Kevin's graduation, but he still felt taken by surprise when it arrived. When they received their diplomas, Neil tried to shake off the awkward uneasiness that pulled at his stomach just like it had when the girls graduated. The Foxes sent their graduating seniors off with a night of drinking and, shortly after, they all moved out of the Tower for summer vacation.

For a day, Neil pretended that things were normal, that Matt was going home to stay with his mother and Kevin was at Wymack's. He gave himself a day to ignore reality while he and Andrew went to Columbia with Nicky and Aaron for the week leading up to their trip to Hawaii.

Things felt normal for the most part. In the morning, Andrew and Neil went for a run that turned into a leisurely walk somewhere after the first mile, which then turned into a cigarette break at an empty park. When they returned, Nicky was in the kitchen making breakfast and mimosas. They ignored him when he joked about a certain physical activity they could have done for exercise instead. Aaron was on the couch with his phone in his hand and, for once, he had no comment.

After that, things continued normally. Nicky disappeared to his bedroom to call Erik. Aaron texted Katelyn and watched television. Neil and Andrew went grocery shopping and stopped by the liquor store to stock up for the week.

The next day, Neil woke to the sight of Andrew's slumbering body in a golden spill of morning light. He stared at the soft line of Andrew's mouth and his relaxed hand against the mattress between them. His heart felt quiet and his mind was still hazy from sleep. Without really meaning to, he turned his thoughts toward the fact that Matt and Kevin weren't going to move back to the Tower with the rest of them after summer break. Matt was in Philadelphia. Dan and Allison were helping him move into his new apartment. Allison probably had the entire place decorated already. Kevin was in Houston with Thea and his new teammates. They were in different states and they would be playing on different courts with different people.

They were moving on and he was fine.

It wasn't really a lie this time.

On the third day, the house was filled with Nicky and Aaron's loud bickering as they tried to beat each other at whatever video games they could find at the house. Andrew pulled Neil out to the
Maserati sometime after lunch and they escaped to the mall for a few hours. On a whim, Neil stopped in front of an electronics store and stared at the window displays.

“I think I want a new phone,” Neil admitted. Matt wouldn't be around to show him the pictures that the girls sent.

Andrew tilted his head, considering, and then he nudged Neil toward the entrance. They wandered up and down the aisles, looking over various models of phones until they agreed on one. Not long later, they walked out with two new matching phones, one gray and one black.

Andrew took care of the new SIM cards and updating the phone plan. Neil took care of texting their new numbers to everyone on their contact lists. The new phones were powered on and connected to service just in time for the trip.

The morning of their flight, Neil sent the five former Foxes a picture of their packed luggage waiting at the bottom of the stairs with a simple, *See you soon.*

His phone chirped at him a second later.

Allison had sent a picture of her face reflected in her bathroom mirror, one sculpted eyebrow arched delicately. *Neil Josten with a decent phone? Get me a jacket cause hell just froze over.*

Dan replied with a picture of Matt behind the wheel of his new truck, grinning and ruffled by the wind whipping through his open window. *C u soon!!*

Renee sent them the view of the sunrise from her kitchen window. *I've missed you all! Safe travels, everyone!*

They would all be together soon and the thought was enough to lift Neil out of his worries about traveling so far from home. His thoughts swung between the last time he'd flown over the ocean and how Andrew would cope with such a long trip. The knot in his stomach tightened as they packed up the car and headed out.

The plans for the trip were messy at best. They had a layover at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport, where they would meet up with Kevin. Dan and Matt had a direct flight from New York with Allison. Renee was leaving North Dakota on her own and would meet them all in Honolulu. They would all arrive within a couple hours of each other. The main problem was that Erik would be the last one getting in and they would need to find an excuse to hang around without Nicky getting suspicious because Nicky still didn't know that his boyfriend was tagging along.

Aaron had figured out the travel arrangements and sent Neil an email a few weeks before that simply read: *Nicky can't object if he doesn't know.* Neil purchased the ticket for Erik Klose and only replied to Aaron's email to tell him as much. Aaron didn't want to tell Nicky after they'd spent so much time arguing about it, but Matt and Dan were the ones who latched onto the idea of it being a fun surprise. Neil thought it would be less stressful to just tell Nicky so they could get to their hotel and come back for Erik when his flight got in, but then Allison bet a hundred dollars that they'd be able to stall without tipping Nicky off. Matt bet against her, thinking Nicky would surely pick up on it. Once the bet was made, the plan to surprise Nicky was set in stone.

It would be seventeen hours before they found out who was right.

It wasn't the longest day of Neil's life, but Neil couldn't seem to remember that through his splintering headache. The first flight was overbooked and turbulent. More than one toddler shrieked and fussed from the time the plane took off to the time it finally landed. Once when it felt
like the plane dropped a little, Andrew gripped Neil's thigh hard enough to leave bruises.

It took them half an hour just to find Kevin at DFW and, when they finally got to their gate, they discovered that their next flight was delayed. They ate a meal in the food court together and listened to Kevin talk about his new apartment and the Sirens' stadium. Neil watched Andrew closely as he picked at his chicken. Andrew's shoulders were tense and his hooded stare swept continuously over the swarms of people all around them. He was on edge and itching for his knives, Neil could tell. The absence of his armbands wasn't noticeable beneath his long sleeves, but he looked different somehow regardless. His strong frame radiated an unspoken challenge: come closer and see if I don't kill you with my bare hands.


Neil took a sip of his water and turned his attention back to the others.

“I just signed with a professional team,” Kevin said with an annoyed sigh. “It's not the best time to go gallivanting off for weeks at a time.”

Nicky scoffed. “It's not 'weeks.' It's a week. One. One week, Kevin.”

Aaron chimed in, “Two days of travel plus three days of actual vacation. That's almost a week.”

“Stop helping, Aaron,” Nicky grumbled, stuffing another handful of fries into his mouth.

“You shouldn't be eating that,” Kevin commented.

“Eat me,” Nicky shot back.

Kevin turned to Neil. “I hope you're not going to let your team eat that crap during the season.”

“I hope you're not going to bring your high horse to Houston,” Neil replied. “I doubt they'll tolerate your bullshit like we did.”

The second flight wasn't much better than the first. Neil sat between Andrew and Kevin towards the back of the plane. Andrew wanted the window seat so he could keep the shade pulled firmly down and slump against the wall. Kevin wanted the aisle so he could get up whenever he pleased without having to climb over anyone. An hour into the flight, Kevin managed to fall asleep somehow. It seemed more appealing than staying awake and Neil was tired enough to nap, but he wasn't going to as long as Andrew looked like he wanted to stab someone with his pen.

Thanks to the delay in Dallas, they landed over an hour later than they were meant to. It was nine o'clock at night local time, but it felt like three in the morning to Neil. His head felt like it was full of cotton and his eyes were unbearably dry. He slung his bag over his shoulder and trudged after Andrew and Kevin through the crowded hallways to the baggage claim area.

He perked up a little when he saw Matt and the girls waiting at the carousel below a screen displaying their flight number. Dan reached him first and nearly knocked him over with the force of her hug, but he didn't mind. Allison reached over Dan's shoulder to ruffle his hair and say that she was pleased to see he'd gotten his hair cut. Once they moved away, Matt locked him in a tight embrace and theatrically cried, “It's been so long! Did you get taller?”

Neil shoved him playfully. He gave Renee a one-armed hug next while she talked to Andrew quietly. Andrew was silent, but his eyes were focused on his old friend and absorbing whatever she was saying about her application to the Peace Corps.
When the duffel bag he shared with Andrew finally appeared on the belt, Neil snatched it and then moved to grab the one he recognized as Nicky's. Aaron finally put his phone away and stepped up to look for his own luggage.


“No sleeping,” Allison said sharply. “You chug coffee or whatever you gotta do to stay awake. We're getting dinner and then staying up until midnight at least. Jetlag can kiss my ass.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Nicky groaned.

“Ugh,” muttered Aaron. “You guys do what you want. I'm going to bed as soon as we get to the hotel.”

Dan hooked her arm around Neil's and said, “Matt and I already looked up a restaurant already. You guys up for going out?”

“As long as there's alcohol,” said Nicky.

Allison scoffed. “'As long as there's alcohol.' Have we met?”

Neil glanced over at Andrew. He'd been unresponsive since Dallas and he was probably completely drained both physically and mentally. Neil didn't know if he would follow them to the restaurant just to sit and stare blankly into a glass of whiskey or if he would retire to the hotel room on his own.

“Actually, I might just crash at the hotel,” Neil said. Andrew turned slightly towards him, but he didn't look up from the floor.

Matt cocked his head and frowned. “You okay?”

Neil gestured at his face. “Bad headache. I just want to lie down.”

Dan frowned sympathetically and Matt patted Neil's head.

Nicky put a hand on his shoulder. “We'll get you to the hotel soon. Aaron, where the fuck is your bag?”

Aaron glared at the bags on the belt that weren't his. “I don't fucking know.”

“It'll show up,” Renee said softly, drifting over to Allison's side. “Does everyone else have their stuff?”

The rest of them did a quick inventory and found that, yes, they all had their bags except for Aaron. Andrew stepped closer to Neil's side and took the duffel bag from him.

“Thanks,” Neil murmured, rolling his aching shoulder after the weight was off it. He glanced around at the people bustling around them, but he saw no sign of Erik.

Allison pulled out her phone and tapped a few buttons with the pad of her thumb, pursing her glossy lips and narrowing her eyes at whatever was on the screen. Renee leaned into her arm to see what she was looking at.

“How's it going with Alex?” Dan asked with a sly grin.

Allison lifted a shoulder. “She hasn't texted in two days, so it's not going at all.”
“You can do better,” Matt said.

Allison quirked an eyebrow. “Tell me something I don't know. You and Kevin better let me know if you have anyone worth dating on your new teams.”

“You really want more Exy players in your life?” Neil asked teasingly.

“They're the only ones who can keep up with me, apparently,” Allison replied with a lofty sigh.

“If you want to go international, Erik has some hot coworkers,” Nicky offered.

Allison hummed and considered it. “Send me pics.”

Nicky yawned and nodded. Aaron was still scowling at the bags and checking his phone every few minutes. Neil looked around again, but this time he caught a glimpse of a familiar face. Erik had finally arrived.

He looked rumpled and exhausted, but he was already smiling. He stopped a few yards away and called, “Nicky!”

Nicky tensed and frowned down at his shoes like he wasn't sure if he imagined that or not. Neil elbowed him to get him to look up. Dan and Matt leaned into each other and bit back grins, watching Nicky eagerly for his reaction.

Lifting his head, Nicky swallowed hard and shakily asked, “You guys see him, too, right?”

“Fucking finally,” Aaron said before he trotted after a suitcase that had already passed him several times.

Erik shot an unamused look at Aaron before returning his attention to Nicky, who still hadn't moved. Neil braced himself for shrieking or something dramatic once Nicky's brain processed his surprise. Everything about Nicky was loud and bright and impossible to ignore. Instead of shouting or crying, though, Nicky simply dropped his bags and walked right into Erik's open arms. Erik smiled at the Foxes over Nicky's shoulder as he folded Nicky into a tight embrace and stroked the back of his head. Nicky tucked his face into his boyfriend's neck and his entire body sagged. He relaxed into Erik's chest like he was finally home after a long journey.

Aaron dragged his suitcase over to stand with the rest of the group and watched Nicky and Erik with an unreadable expression.

“You did a really good thing for him, Aaron,” Renee commented.

“Yeah, it's almost like you guys are family or something,” Allison added sarcastically.

Aaron gave her an annoyed glare without much heat behind it. Matt wrapped an arm around Dan's shoulders and squeezed her to his side. He hid a smile against her hair and murmured something only she could hear. Dan's grin widened.

Erik pulled away from Nicky just enough to press a kiss to his cheekbone and look him in the eye. Nicky nodded at whatever he said and then tucked his face back into Erik's shoulder.

Neil noticed a woman standing off to the side, who paused to eye the embracing men with uncertainty in her eyes. She twisted her hand around the strap of her purse, frowning a little as Erik dropped a kiss to Nicky's shoulder. They were oblivious to their audience, still wrapped up in the relief of being reunited.
“You got a problem, asshole?” Aaron snarled.

Several people turned at his harsh tone. The woman jolted in surprise and her eyes darted to Aaron and the other Foxes. Nicky lifted his head at his cousin's voice and visibly tensed when he saw the woman opening her mouth like she wanted to say something. Erik ignored her. He planted another kiss on Nicky's cheek and then ushered him over to the others with an arm looped around his waist. Aaron and Andrew stared at the woman until she finally closed her mouth and walked away.

Erik gave Neil a little nod of acknowledgment and then greeted the others with a simple, “Hello, everyone.”

Nicky was still leaning against Erik's side, quiet and dazed.

“Hey, man,” Matt said brightly. “How was the flight?”

“Long.” Erik laughed.

While Erik talked to Matt and the girls, Nicky shook himself out of his thoughts and smiled at Neil. “Did you buy his ticket?” he asked.

Neil shrugged. “Aaron's idea.”

Nicky looked past him at Aaron, who was standing on the outskirts of the group awkwardly.

“I just didn't want to be the one getting dragged into your weird tourist shit,” Aaron said, trying and failing to sound harsh.

“Oh, you're still doing weird tourist shit with us,” Nicky said. “Erik will throw you over his shoulder and carry you if he has to.”

“You could fit in my pocket,” Erik added with a wicked glint in his eye.

Aaron looked like he was beginning to regret his decision to be nice to his cousin.

“Not that I don't enjoy standing around airports,” Allison began dryly, “but let's get out of here, shall we?”

The rented three cars, figuring that would be enough for the group during the week. Allison texted Neil directions to the hotel before they packed up the cars and left the parking lot. The air was filled with the scent of the nearby ocean and the lights of buildings and streetlamps. Andrew guided the car through the streets washed in gold while Neil read directions off his phone until they found their hotel at last. Andrew parked beside the SUV that Matt, Kevin, and Aaron had driven over in.

They got their keys at the front desk and then dragged themselves into the elevators. Neil slumped against the wall and fought to keep his eyes from drooping as they ascended to the fifth floor. He followed Andrew down the hallway to their room. After using the bathroom, he stepped back out into the hallway to see the others off, assuring them that he would order room service for dinner and get a good night's rest.

“Don't let Andrew wear you out too much tonight,” Allison called with a sly smile over her shoulder as she followed Renee to the elevator.

Neil rolled his eyes and stepped back into his and Andrew's room. Directly opposite the door was a private balcony, but Neil couldn't see anything through the dark glass thanks to the bedroom lights.
glaring off it. Andrew stood at the foot of the bed, staring blankly at the blindingly white linens. The bags were at his feet and his arms were limp at his sides. He looked like a husk of his usual self and Neil began to consider sleeping on the overstuffed sofa in the far corner that night. The bed was larger than the bed they had spent all week sharing in Columbia, but he didn't want to step too close to Andrew's boundaries. Distance was always better on nights like this.

"Don't touch me." The words rumbled in Andrew's throat like thunder.

"Okay," Neil replied. "Do you want to take a shower?"

"Yes."

"Okay. I'll order some food." Neil moved away from the bathroom door and stood by the wall while Andrew rooted around the duffel bag for a change of clean clothes and his armbands. Neil pinned his hands to the cool wall behind his back and watched patiently. Andrew didn't look at him once.

The bathroom door swung shut heavily. Neil went to the phone on the bedside table and found a menu laying next to it. The toilet flushed, then the sink cut on. Neil looked over the laminated paper for something Andrew would like before deciding to get a variety just in case. He ordered a club sandwich, roast chicken, and a steak along with half the appetizers listed and a brownie.

The shower was running when he hung up the phone. His body felt cramped and stiff after sitting all day, so he paced up and down the length of the room a few times. He opened the balcony doors to let the balmy night air inside before changing his mind and closing them again. Still humming with nervous energy, he kicked off his shoes and changed into flannel pants and a PSU t-shirt. He sank into the sofa and flipped through one of the magazines from the coffee table while he waited.

Ten minutes later, the bathroom door opened and out shuffled Andrew. He immediately crawled into the bed, leaving only a few wet tufts of hair peeking out from between the pillow and the top of the comforter.

Four sharp knocks at the door startled him, but he quickly recovered and padded across the room to answer it. After a "here you go" and a "thanks" Neil carried the tray of food into the room and paused, chewing his lip and thinking. Andrew didn't move, but he hadn't eaten much that day.

Neil set the tray down on the floor next to Andrew's side of the bed before dragging the round ottoman over from the sitting area. He cleared off the nightstand and shoved the lamp into the back corner so he could put a plate and a water bottle on it. He sat on the ottoman with the rest of the tray at his feet and began eating his club sandwich.

He ate slowly, pausing every now and then to take bites of the small salad that came with it. Andrew didn't move. After half the sandwich was gone, Neil set it aside and picked up the bacon-wrapped shrimp. He eyed them warily before slowly putting one in his mouth. Wrinkling his nose, he set that plate down again and picked up the steak. After cutting half of it into bite-sized chunks, he began eating.

The Andrew-sized lump under the covers shifted before Andrew tugged the comforter down to uncover his face. His eyes went from Neil's face to the plate of food and Neil understood what Andrew wanted. He stabbed another chunk of meat with the fork and held it out in offering. Andrew leaned up and took the meat between his teeth, carefully pulling it off the fork into his mouth. Neil waited for him to chew and swallow before offering him another. Andrew's eyes were still hazy and unfocused, but Neil took his willingness to eat as a good sign.
After a few more bites, Andrew pushed the comforter below his shoulders and reached for the fork himself. Finding the angle awkward, he moved to sit up against the pillows. He pulled the plate into his lap and continued eating. He ate the rest of his sandwich and tried not to stare at Andrew's haggard profile. Andrew finished his steak and mashed potatoes before Neil finished his own food. With one hand, Neil took the plate from Andrew and put it on the floor before handing Andrew his dessert.

Andrew rolled one of his shoulders to pop his back before accepting the brownie. “You gonna eat all that food or did you just feel like wasting money?”

It shouldn't have been as much of a relief as it was. Neil rolled his eyes and said, “I didn't know what you'd be in the mood for. I was covering my bases.”

“You hate baseball.”

“And you hate me.”

Andrew looked over at him dully.

Neil shrugged and tilted his chin up, challenging. “Since we're stating facts, what else do you have?”

“You're irritating.”

“You like it.”
Neil's phone chimed for the fourth time in ten minutes. Andrew gave him a flat look before blowing out a cloud of smoke into the breeze. They'd come out to the balcony to soak up sunshine and nicotine, but Neil's phone was beginning to be a bit of a nuisance.

Two days had gone by since their group arrived in Honolulu and Andrew had already put his phone on silent mode permanently due to the obscene number of messages that flooded the group chat during the day. Since the Foxes split up for their various activities, they texted constantly and sent photos whenever they could. Aaron was the only person besides Andrew who never sent any messages, but he usually appeared as a blur in the background of Nicky's photos.

Neil was happy to be surrounded by his family again and he wanted to spend more time with them, but he woke that morning feeling exhausted and a little hungover. After breakfast, he and Andrew decided to keep to their room that day instead of going to the beach to watch Matt attempt to teach the girls how to surf like they'd planned.

When his phone chimed again, Neil pulled up the group chat and looked at the photo Nicky had sent. Instead of it being of himself and Erik, the photo captured a sour-faced Aaron pulling himself out of a prickly shrub beside a brown sign that said “TRAIL.” It looked like there were a few twigs and leaves in his hair and stuck to his clothing. The message below it read: Erik wants to leaf him here.

Allison replied immediately, Explain this.

Are you three getting along? asked Renee.

Stick together!! said Matt.

Treet him carefully, Dan added along with a photo of herself, winking at the camera.

Nicky sent a picture of Erik’s profile. He looked stern and vaguely annoyed, which was an expression he only seemed to wear in Aaron's presence. Erik pushed him into the bushes bc he made a bad joke. He'll learn.

Let's send Aaron back to Europe and keep Erik, Allison said.
Matt texted back, *We'd have to stack the twins in a trench coat to make it a fair trade. Sorry Neil its for a good cause.*

*Good luck germany,* Dan commented.

Neil pursed his lips and typed, *Send Aaron with a mirror or something.*

*Awww you want to keep your booooyfriend,* Matt teased.

Neil rolled his eyes and put his phone back in his pocket. Andrew's eyes slid away from him, looking back out over the endless stretch of blue on the horizon.

He watched Andrew take another drag off his cigarette. Inside their room, Kevin grumbled something at the television from his spot on the couch. He'd come over to their room to talk with Neil about an idea he had for the Foxes' offense and to watch Jean Moreau's interview on some daytime talk show. Kevin was scheduled to fly back to Texas the next morning, but he seemed tired of his vacation already. Neil understood the itch to get back on the court as soon as possible, but he wasn't feeling it now. He was content.

“You're staring again,” Andrew pointed out. “Did you get bored of your new toy already?”

“If you were as half as good at ignoring me as you like to think you are, you wouldn't notice me staring.”

“Your survival instincts are getting rusty. If I knocked you over the edge, the fall would kill you.”

Neil hummed thoughtfully and leaned over the railing to look at the parking lot full of cars that were shimmering in the heat. He gripped the railing with one hand and leaned further, bending nearly in half, until a firm hand twisted into the back of his shirt and yanked him upright. Neil smirked as Andrew squashed his cigarette into the tray and stalked inside to sit beside Kevin on the sofa. He joined them a minute later.

Neil's phone chimed as soon as he sat down. Nicky had sent them all a photo taken from the top of Diamond Head. The gray buildings of the city rose behind a stretch of green grass and trees. Above was the clear blue sky and to the left stretched the ocean, streaked with white near the pale beach. The caption read: *Fuck hiking.*

Beside him, Kevin typed, *How is it that a college athlete is allergic to exercise?*

*I exercised all night long bro,* was Nicky's reply.

Matt texted back, *We heard.*

*The whole island heard,* Allison chimed in.

Nicky replied, *At least we dont fuck at the dorms when other ppl are studying, MATTHEW!!*

*Fair point,* said Matt. Dan sent a picture of Matt's cheesy grin a few seconds later. The beach was sun-soaked and golden behind Matt's tanned shoulders.

Allison sent, *Btw you need to buy poor Renee earplugs since you're the ones ruining her sleep schedule.*

*Sorry renee!* Nicky posted a photo of himself with an exaggerated frown. Beside him, Erik looked smug.
I'm happy you two get to spend time together! Don't listen to Allison. I already bought my own earplugs.

After a few quiet minutes, Dan joked, *Talk abt a good lei tho.*

Kevin dropped his phone onto the cushion and sighed loudly. “Idiots.”

Neil could almost hear fondness buried somewhere in Kevin's tone, but he didn't comment on it. On the television, Jean was still sitting stiffly on a tan couch trying to answer questions about the Nest and the Ravens without revealing anything important. He wasn't able to say much at all.

Jean's awkward interview ended five minutes later and Kevin made up a vague excuse to head back to his room. They knew he was just going to call Thea for the third time that day. Neil changed the channel until he found a game show and they continued watching in silence.

At noon, Neil and Andrew set out into the city and eventually stumbled across a small restaurant that seemed as good a place as any to stop for lunch. The walls were covered with plastic sleeves holding vintage photographs and old flyers. Chatty, bright-eyed tourists sat around tables with bowls and plates of food arranged in front of them. The smell of sunscreen and perfume mixed with the aromas coming off the steaming dishes.

They took a booth in the corner, which left a few empty tables between themselves and the nearest group of sun-tanned blondes wearing colorful bikinis under their white tank tops and denim shorts. Neil ordered a combination plate for the two of them to split while Andrew stared out the window at the people strolling along the sidewalk.

After the waitress set down their drinks and left them, Neil asked, “Do you want to shop around for Betsy's gift?”

Without looking at him, Andrew answered, “I got it yesterday.”

Neil nodded. He should've guessed as much. Andrew had spent three hours with Renee while Neil and Kevin wandered around the USS Arizona Memorial.

Frowning, Neil took out his phone and pulled up the group chat. *You guys getting anything for Wymack/Abby?*

*Wymack said a break from us is enough of a present,* replied Nicky.


Nicky texted back, *Omg why?? Thats gonna suck so bad for us??*

*For u haha I'll be in Philly.*

Once their food arrived, Neil silenced his phone and put it away. Andrew pulled the bowl of pipikaula toward himself and scooped half the rice from the serving bowl onto his plate, leaving Neil with the rest of the food. Andrew ripped one of the pieces of beef in half and ate it while Neil eyed the plate of laulau.

“Are you supposed to eat the leaves?” Andrew asked.

Neil shrugged one shoulder and glanced over at the closest table to see how they ate it. “I don't think so.”
He tugged the plate closer and carefully unwrapped the leafy pouch. Inside it, he found more leaves that looked like spinach and cooked pork. After his first bite, he offered some to Andrew, but Andrew ignored him.

They ate in comfortable silence, only trading a few comments on the food or whether or not they wanted to go to the beach that night with the others. Neil had gone with Kevin and Matt for a run the day before and hadn't felt anything close to panic out on the sand. He had plenty of memories from the Foxes' last trip to the beach to latch onto when his mind almost tricked him into thinking he could smell gasoline on the breeze.

Andrew portioned out the kalua pig evenly between their plates and they finished it with the rest of the rice before moving on to the sweet, white squares of haupia. Neil took one bite of the dessert and handed the rest over to Andrew.

While Andrew finished eating, Neil couldn't resist checking his phone again. There was one message from Nicky that said, *Hawaii McD's is better than ours.* Below it was a photo of Dan's left hand with a simple diamond ring on her third finger, flashing in the sunshine. The caption from Matt was: *She said yes!!!*

Neil blinked at the photo. He'd known this was coming, of course. Matt had told him a year or so ago that he wanted to marry Dan, that he planned to propose after graduation.

Renee's message came first. *I'm so thankful that you two found each other. Watching you grow to respect and support and love each other has been amazing. You're both so important to me and I couldn't be happier for you.*

*What the fuck? You couldn't have waited until I came back from snorkeling?* demanded Allison.

*We kno ur happy for us,* replied Dan. *Bside u wanted 2 look @ fish u loser.*

*Whatever. Fuck the fish.*

Neil sent a short “congratulations” before telling Andrew, “Dan and Matt got engaged.”

Andrew looked up at him dully. “Okay.”

The next three messages came from Nicky. *I thought we agreed you'd wait til sunset!*

*I mean congrats but... we had plans man.*

*Btw I'm totally not bitter that everyone is getting hitched before me... Oh and Erik is happy for you too EVEN THO Matt is a hot mess who cant stick to plans.*

*Thanks, guys!!! Nicky who else is engaged?* asked Matt.

*Oops.*

Kevin added, *Congratulations. Don't let wedding planning be a distraction.*

*Dan, remind me to give you the wedding binder later,* Allison texted a few minutes later.

*The what??*

Neil shook his head and put his phone down on the table before Dan got her answer. Allison and Renee had been making plans since Matt first brought up the idea of proposing. If Dan had no objections, they would probably be married that December. Neil was asked for input once or twice
before Allison decided he'd be of no help to them.

“I've never been to a wedding,” he said.

“I'm shocked,” Andrew deadpanned.

Neil hadn't given much thought to the concept of marriage- only occasionally when he wondered what about his father had convinced his mother to say, “I do.” In his childhood home, there had once been a photo of them together, white gown and black tux, sitting on the mantle above the fireplace in the study. They were both fierce creatures, both willing to do unspeakable things for their own reasons. Neil sometimes wondered how they ended up at the altar, promising each other forever, swearing they'd take the world by storm. They couldn't have known that the child they made together would tear them apart.

Once, he'd asked Matt why he wanted to get married at all- wasn't knowing they'd be together forever enough? Matt explained that he wanted to make it official and leave evidence behind that they'd made a commitment to one another. He wanted to gather all his friends and family and spend an entire day celebrating the fact that he and Dan had chosen each other. He wanted to swear in front of everyone that they'd keep on choosing each other until the day they died.

Marriage wasn't something Neil ever considered for himself, really, but he could understand the appeal of wanting proof on paper. He figured it was similar to how he felt when he officially became Neil Abram Josten.

He looked at Andrew just as Andrew turned away from the window to look at him.

“Ready to go?” Andrew asked.

“Yeah.”

They walked back to their hotel since neither had a place they'd rather be. The three rental cars for their group were all missing; the others were all out enjoying the day. His phone buzzed a few more times in his pocket as they rode the elevator up to their floor, but he ignored the texts.

Their room was full of sunlight and feather-soft silence. Neil shut the door quietly behind them and joined Andrew in the middle of the room, taking a moment to study Andrew's profile. Andrew's jaw worked for a moment and his eyes narrowed. Neil saw the moment he made a decision. Their eyes met and something in Neil's belly melted like butter.

Andrew pulled Neil down into a slow, thorough kiss. Excitement flooded Neil's body instantly, clearing away everything but the feeling of Andrew's mouth.

“Can I touch you?” he murmured, hopeful.

Andrew leaned in again and dragged his teeth over Neil's lower lip. “Bare skin only.”

Neil pulled back enough to look over Andrew. Not much was exposed- his hands, a strip of skin between his armbands and the sleeves of his shirt, his neck, his ears, his face. He brought Andrew's right hand to his mouth to kiss the center of his callused palm. Andrew watched intently, eyes dark, as Neil repeated the gesture with his left hand as well. Neil lightly bit the base of Andrew's thumb, tasted the salt of his skin, and let go.

Anticipating his next move, Andrew tilted his head to one side so that Neil could trail damp kisses up the side of his neck. Neil felt Andrew's shiver and Andrew must have felt Neil's smirk just below his ear. Neil's fingers laced with Andrew's between their bodies while he tried to cover
Andrew's jaw and throat with kisses like invisible stamps. When he made it to Andrew's other ear, he nipped at his earlobe before seeking out Andrew's mouth for another rough kiss.

Neil looked down when Andrew's hands broke away from his. He froze and watched as Andrew worked off his armbands and let them fall to the carpet. Neil brushed his fingers up the rows of raised lines on Andrew's forearms and pressed into the creases of his elbows. There was only their soft breathing, the quickening of Neil's pulse, and the fingertips sliding over Andrew's warm skin.

Cautiously, Neil lifted Andrew's wrist to his mouth to kiss along the scar tissue there. After the third kiss, Andrew withdrew his arm from Neil's grasp so he could reach behind his head and yank his baggy t-shirt off. The shirt dropped and Neil's heart leaped.

He flattened his hands over Andrew's chest as he kissed along the ridge of his collarbone. Andrew lifted his chin to allow Neil space to do so and Neil could hear the hitch in Andrew's breathing when his tongue dipped into the hollow at the base of his throat. Neil slid his hands down Andrew's sides and squeezed his hips.

“Still yes?” he mumbled against Andrew's heated skin.

Andrew swallowed convulsively. “Yes.”

Neil licked Andrew's neck firmly enough to feel the excited flutter of his pulse. His hands traveled up the strong planes of Andrew's back to his shoulder blades. He smiled against Andrew's hair when he shivered. He explored as much of Andrew's torso as he could, massaging small circles into his lower back, rubbing lines up and down either side of his spine, sliding his palms over his hard abdomen, lightly pinching his nipples until they stiffened and Andrew shivered again.

The tension that had been slowly building between them snapped. Andrew nudged Neil away and stepped back toward the bed, stopping to shove down his jeans and underwear in one go. His socks were stripped off last and flung in the direction of his shirt. Andrew stood, naked and erect, with a heat in his eyes that Neil couldn't ignore even if he tried.

**Bare skin only.**

Neil quickly shed the rest of his clothing and knelt at Andrew's feet. Andrew stared down at him, straight-faced and guarded, but Neil didn't have to see any sign of vulnerability to know it was there. *Above the hips* had been their rule for the most part. Sometimes Neil's feet touched the backs of Andrew's calves while he thrust into Neil. Sometimes his hands touched Andrew's jean-clad thighs. Neil wanted to savor this, but he also knew Andrew would prefer to hurry it up.

Neil put his hands on Andrew's calves first and slid them upward at a pace that would allow Andrew to get used to the feeling without getting frustrated. He lightly squeezed the solid muscles of Andrew's thighs before smoothing his palms over Andrew's ass. Neil kissed the head of his cock when it twitched slightly and Andrew immediately buried his hands in Neil's hair. While Neil continued to leave open-mouthed kisses along the underside of his dick, he explored Andrew's warm, bare legs with light touches and mentally took note of which spots made his breathing hitch.

With one hand in Neil's hair, Andrew used the other to guide himself into Neil's mouth. Neil squeezed his hips again and took in as much of Andrew's length as he could before his throat burned in protest. Neil stroked the backs of his thighs soothingly while he worked his cock in and out of his mouth, quickly finding a rhythm of *push, pull* that turned Andrew's breathing ragged. He distracted himself from the hot clench of his throat when he pulled Andrew in too far by focusing on the quiver in Andrew's thighs, his fingers twisting in Neil's hair, and the bitten-off grunts of pleasure.
“Neil,” Andrew warned.

Neil pulled back a few inches just as Andrew's body tensed. He came thickly on Neil's tongue and wrapped one hand around the rest of his slick shaft to stroke himself through his orgasm. When he was finished, he grunted softly and pulled away. Neil let him go and sat back on his heels to swallow and catch his breath. He wiped the back of his hand over his swollen mouth and looked up. A rosy flush painted Andrew's sweat-shiny skin. He stared intensely down at Neil, breathing hard and shivering.

His eyes dropped from Neil's swollen mouth to the aching erection still pressed against Neil's belly. “Get on the bed.”

Neil obeyed eagerly. As soon as his knee hit the edge of the mattress, Andrew gripped his shoulder and flipped him onto his back. He hooked his hands under Neil's knees to shove him toward the bed's center before crawling up Neil's body and crushing their mouths together in a frantic, clumsy kiss. Arousal tightened almost painfully in Neil's groin; heat spread through him and lit up every nerve-ending. His heart was pounding, his lungs weren't pulling in enough air, but he didn't care so long as Andrew kept kissing him like it was the last thing they'd ever get to do.

Still, he could feel it when Andrew hesitated.

“It's yes,” Neil whispered against Andrew's lips.

Andrew's hot hand wrapped around him and squeezed. An embarrassingly needy gasp flew from Neil's mouth into Andrew's. He dug his fingers into Andrew's shoulders while Andrew's rough pace made him fall apart. The world went hazy. Sweat gathered at the small of his back and in the creases of his bent knees. Light bloomed behind his eyelids. Andrew licked deeply into his mouth even when Neil could barely stay focused enough to kiss back properly. His pleasure was a heavy ache, on the verge of being overwhelming, before the tension in his body released all at once and he came hard with Andrew's name on his tongue. Andrew muffled Neil's deep groan with his mouth and continued stroking him until the last little tremors of his orgasm faded away.

Andrew got the box of tissues from the nightstand while Neil shivered and tried to breathe properly. While his senses reassembled, he lay still and let Andrew wipe off his stomach and chest. He wanted to say something, but his throat was raw and his mind was numb.

All he could manage was, “Andrew.”

Andrew glanced at him before tossing the wad of dirty tissues in the wastebasket and padding across the room to the bathroom. Neil's eyes slipped shut and he drifted in shallow thoughts, listening to the rush of water in the bathroom. He opened his eyes when he heard Andrew come back out. Clothing rustled and then the balcony doors scraped over the carpet, letting in a gust of warm wind.

Inhaling deeply, Neil shook off the urge to sleep and propped himself up on his elbows. His phone was buzzing again in his discarded jeans on the floor. Andrew was leaning against the railing outside in his shirt and sweats, a cigarette between his lips and his eyes on Neil.

The word *forever* hung at the back of his tongue, but he didn't feel the need to say it. He knew. Andrew knew. That would always be enough.
To Make or Break a Cycle

Chapter Summary

Robin Cross joins the Foxes.

Chapter Notes

I'm back! Thanks so much for being patient while I was on hiatus. Posting will be a bit slow still, but hopefully I'll have the next chapter up within the next month. As always, thanks so much for reading!

Robin Cross and her backstory come from Nora's extra content! I don't take credit for her.

Content warnings: mentions of a past kidnapping

On the first day of summer practice, it only took Holly a few hours to completely lose her temper. After a couple drills and a short scrimmage, the team took a water break and she came storming over to Neil seething, “You've gotta be fucking kidding me.”

Neil sighed and lowered his water bottle from his mouth. “Holly-”

“No, I'm serious. Is this some sort of 'ha ha prank your new vice-captain' thing or what? Because you've gotta be fucking kidding me.”

He looked past her shoulder to where the rest of the team was standing around in clusters with their power bars and water bottles, all of them pretending not to eavesdrop. Neil accidentally locked eyes with Robin Cross, the new goalkeeper and the source of Holly's ire. She was average height with dark, frightened eyes and black curls pulled back from her light brown face in a bushy ponytail- what made her stand out was the fear she radiated and the shy hunch of her shoulders. The Foxes had a new weak link and no reason to play nice.

Jack and Sheena watched Neil like vultures waiting for their next meal. As team captain, he'd helped Wymack choose who to recruit and, since most of them were unwilling to challenge Wymack's authority, they took their complaints to Neil. Andrew was the only one who didn't seem interested in why Holly was livid; he sat next to Neil on the bench and texted Renee without so much as a glance at the younger girl.

“Moron,” scoffed Jack. “You could break both my legs and I'd still move faster than her.”

Holly glared at Jack like she did actually want to break both his legs. “There's only one person on this team that cares what you think, Jack- unless Sheena finally managed to grow some brain cells over summer vacation.”
Brian's eyebrows jumped up. “Damn.”

“Sheena muttered.

“It'll be fine,” Neil said as he adjusted the bandana holding his hair off his forehead. “Freshmen always need time to get into the swing of things.”

Holly gave him another baleful look and marched back to where she'd left her bottle of Gatorade. Some of the other sophomores inched fearfully away from their new vice-captain. Brook and Lizzy exchanged a look before Brook went over to talk to Robin- she was the only one willing to speak to Robin, apparently.

Neil guessed the others had all satisfied their curiosity the same way he did. Most of Robin's personal history was laid out neatly online, so it was easy enough to put all the pieces together and figure out what had happened to her: Robin Cross was kidnapped when she was young, snatched right off a playground while her mother was distracted. The man who took her kept her for years in his soundproofed, padlocked basement and eventually he trained Robin to lure in other little girls. One day, the police got too close and Robin was left behind to get caught. Bad luck chewed her up and spat her back out again into her old life. Judging by what he read, everyone expected her to fit right back into the space she’d vacated, but Neil knew that was impossible. There was no way Robin went through years of torment and came out unchanged. According to one online journal, Robin's bedroom was kept exactly as it was on the day of her disappearance. Neil could only imagine how disorienting it was for her to step back into it, years older and worlds away from the girl she once was.

Her parents drove her to the Tower on Sunday; they helped her move in and everything. They even brought cookies for their daughter's new teammates, which most of the Foxes were hesitant to take. Sure, they all knew better than to turn down free food, but most of them had a deeply ingrained suspicion of parents.

Neil had awkwardly accepted a cookie from Mrs. Cross- he was team captain, after all. For a second, he feared she would try to hug him. Mr. Cross shook Neil’s hand and held on too long, looking close to tears. Robin didn't look upset or embarrassed, she simply stood in the main room of her new dorm and stared blankly at the walls. The other Foxes hovered in the doorway, peering in at the sniffling parents and their obviously adored daughter like scientists studying a new species of mammal.

The sophomores and juniors were quick to decide that Robin wasn’t one of them.

To make matters worse, Robin seemed to forget everything about Exy the moment she set foot on the court. The first time she flinched away from Neil's shot on goal, Neil was actually thankful that Kevin wasn't there to witness it. Jack and Holly reacted badly enough.

Wymack believed in all his players, never gave up hope that they'd improve and make something of themselves, so Neil attempted to borrow some of his optimism. It didn't fit him well. To him, Robin Cross was a condemned building: hollow, haunted, ready to cave in. In her gloomy eyes, Neil saw the kind of exhaustion that settled into someone's bones after years of standing on the wrong side of their pain threshold.

Andrew knew what it was like to hit rock bottom and break, but he hadn't spared her a single glance. If Neil didn’t know better, he would’ve assumed Andrew forgot that he was ever interested in Robin Cross.

“Neil!” barked Lizzy. When Neil looked over at her, she grinned and slung her racquet over her
shoulders. “Sorry, am I making too much of a racket?”

Neil stared at her blankly while Brian laughed.

Her smile dropped. “Fuck you. That was sorta funny.”

Nicky patted Lizzy's hair and then jumped away when she playfully swatted at him. He knocked into Aaron, who shoved him away with a grumbled, “Knock it off.”

In spite of the sour mood and the fact that Kevin and Matt were no longer there, it still felt pretty good to be back. Another season would start soon and the Foxes would have another chance to make it to finals. Neil was determined and cautiously hopeful. He had one more year to play alongside Andrew and he was going to make it last as long as he could.

Once practice resumed, Neil watched Robin continue to struggle and felt an uneasy twisting in his gut that told him she would be their weak spot this year.

He wanted to believe things would get better as that first week went on, but he wasn't exactly surprised when they didn't.

Robin was a mouse. She flinched away from the ball like she expected it to pull a knife on her, she shrank away from the snide remarks of the sophomores and juniors, and she looked close to tears the first time Wymack raised his voice above his normal speaking level. She was one of the jumpiest things Neil had ever seen.

He wanted to know why Andrew insisted on signing her, but he kept quiet about it until they were at Eden's that Friday. After the second round of drinks, Nicky and Aaron stumbled toward the packed dance floor to lose each other and themselves for a good long while. Nicky was buzzing with anxious energy after a spat with Erik over Skype, which Neil had caught the end of. It hadn't sounded pretty, but it wasn't long before murmured apologies seeped through the bedroom door. Aaron was in a foul mood as well. According to Nicky, Aaron's latest dinner with Katelyn's parents hadn't gone well, but Aaron wasn't willing to give up details about what went wrong.

While his family members set off into the crowded dance floor with too much booze in their systems and not enough sense in their heads, Andrew nursed a glass of whiskey and casually scanned the club for for signs of trouble.

After Neil tipped back his second shot of tequila, he pulled his chair closer to Andrew's and leaned in to ask, “Are you ever going to tell me about Robin?”

Andrew didn't pull away like Neil expected him to; he turned his head and let their noses bump into each other. Neil fought to hold onto his question.

“You met her,” Andrew said flatly. “Five-seven, dark hair, stands in the goalkeeper's box sometimes. Is this ringing any bells or should I find a sketch artist?”

It was painfully hard to focus with Andrew's mouth right there. Slowly, Neil asked, “Why did you tell Wymack to sign her?”

Andrew blinked. “Figured I'd finally earn that participation ribbon.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Fine. Don't tell me.”

“Generous of you to give me permission, Captain.”
Andrew tilted his face away just enough to take another sip of whiskey. Neil looked over Andrew's cheek, his pale blond stubble caught the light here and there along his jaw. He didn't have to wonder about how rough it would feel against his neck or inner thighs. The music was vibrating in his lungs and a whole crowd of people were just outside the little alcove, but Neil didn't really care. He closed the small gap and pressed a kiss to the corner of Andrew's mouth.

“Get a room!” Aaron shouted over the music.

Neil jerked back and met Aaron's drunken scowl with a hard look of his own. Andrew took another drink and ignored his twin altogether.

Nicky bumped into Aaron's back and cackled as they nearly toppled over. Together, they stumbled to the table and collapsed into their seats.

“Don't mind him,” Nicky told Neil, blindly reaching out to ruffle his cousin's sweaty hair. “He's just grumpy 'cause his in-laws don't like him.”

“It's fuckin' bullshit, 's what it is,” slurred Aaron before he belched into his fist.

Nicky chuckled. “Tequila's your friend, man. Just have more tequila.”

“It's bull-shit.” Aaron stabbed at the table to punctuate each syllable and then lifted his finger to point at Neil. “Not a word, Justin.”


“Whatsoever the fuck your name is,” Aaron amended, scowling at Neil, “just keep your mouth shut.”

“I didn't say anything,” Neil replied blandly.

Wild-eyed, Aaron leaned forward and said, “You don't even know how to be a normal person, you know? You'd be a terrible dad.”

Nicky's laughter died. He blinked owlishly at his cousin and visibly struggled to make sense of the strange turn the conversation took. Neil himself was having trouble connecting the dots. No one had mentioned anything about parents or kids, as far as he knew.

“The cheerleader's parents want grandkids,” Andrew guessed dryly.

Nicky gaped while Aaron glared at his brother. “She has a name, Andrew.”

Andrew didn't care enough to make a reply to that. Neil wondered if this subject came up in their shared sessions with Betsy.

“Oh, Aaron,” Nicky cooed sympathetically, practically falling on top of Aaron as he threw an arm around his shoulders. “I'm sure you and Katelyn will make beautiful babies.”

Aaron shoved Nicky away, nostrils flaring and chest heaving. “Fuck that, you hear me? Fuck that. I remember my childhood just fine. I don't need to watch the rerun.”

“Aaron-”

“The apple doesn't fall far from the tree,’ right?” he sneered. “Like hell I'm having kids. This shit dies with me.”

The familiar saying made Neil so uncomfortable that he reached for a glass on the tray, not caring
what was in it. As drunk as he was, Aaron's words were surprisingly vicious and raw with a fear that Neil knew all too well. He didn't want to find out if his father's cruelty was lying dormant in his veins. “I won't be like them,” Andrew had said and, like him, Neil wouldn't give his own history room to repeat itself.

“But doesn't Katelyn want kids?” Nicky asked, frowning deeply at the side of his cousin's head.

“No, she wants dogs, but Helen and Paul are convinced she'll change her mind in a few years. Her brother doesn't even care what Katelyn says. He just wants whatever brats his wife pops out in the future to have cousins.”

Nicky swallowed another shot of tequila and dazedly said, “Cousins can be nice.”

Aaron gave him a long, dry look.

“Are you worried about your kids being real short?” Nicky asked with a dopey hiccup of a laugh. “Because that's totally fair. Oh! Oh, my god. Neil and Andrew would have the tiniest babies! Little pocket-sized smartasses.”

“Switch to water, Nicky,” Neil said flatly.

Nicky squinted at him. “I'm not drunk. You're drunk.”

“Time to call it a night,” said Andrew.

Aaron rubbed at his eyes and grumbled something Neil couldn't hear. Nicky nodded and prodded at Aaron's shoulder until they both managed to get to their feet. Neil stayed behind to put all the glasses on the tray and then jogged to catch up to the others near the door.

Later, as he lay awake listening to Andrew's soft breathing, he realized he never got his answer about Robin.

He put the question out of his mind and tried not to think too hard about it as the next week began. There were more pressing issues that he had to deal with: Jack and Sheena's bitter alliance was breaking and their caustic words were spilling everywhere, Nicky's usual cheerful disposition was wearing thin under his impatience to be reunited with Erik, Holly's intensity on the court only grew with the added pressure of the vice-captaincy, Tara was withdrawn and losing weight. Neil made a heroic effort to rein in Holly's temper and push the divided ranks of sophomore and juniors closer together, and he got only headaches in return.

The younger Foxes treated Robin like roadkill: poking and provoking to see if there were signs of life, but Robin Cross remained dead-eyed in her mental ditch. Neil tried to motivate her and stepped in where he could. Wymack let her sleep on his couch a few times when hostile arguments exploded in the dorms. There wasn't much they could do, though, when she wouldn't even open her mouth to defend herself.

No one saw it coming when, a few weeks later, Andrew announced, “Tonight, we're taking Robin to Columbia.”

Nicky and Aaron paused their video game and twisted around in their beanbags to look at Andrew in total confusion. Neil pressed his feet hard against the carpet to avoid falling off Andrew's desk chair. Andrew was perched on his desk near the open window like a statue and didn't bother to meet any of their incredulous stares.

“Are you serious?” Aaron asked.
“Robin,” Nicky pronounced slowly. “Robin Cross? Or is there another Robin I’m forgetting about?”

Neil sputtered, “But why?”

Andrew flicked ash out the window and gave him no answer. No matter how hard Neil tried, he couldn’t find Andrew’s reasons behind this like he usually could. His first night in Columbia rushed back to him in a flurry of painful shards. He felt sick as he thought of watching someone else go through that, someone he was supposed to be looking out for.

Neil glanced at Nicky and Aaron before lowering his voice and saying, “You wanted her here.”

“I told you to sign her, that’s all,” Andrew replied.

“Are you going to drug her?” he demanded. “Because if you are, I can’t be there. I can’t sit and watch that.”

“Such a devoted captain.” Andrew's voice put ice in Neil's veins. “I don't have a reason to drug her, do I?”

Of course, Andrew wouldn't hurt her unless she threatened his family. Robin was a threat to no one. Neil was taken aback when he realized he'd misjudged Andrew and made the wrong assumption. The weight of his responsibilities as Robin's captain knocked him off balance, left him out of sync with Andrew. It wasn't a feeling he was comfortable with.

Deflating, Neil asked, “How are you going to convince her to come with us?”

Andrew stared for a long, cold moment before saying, “She already agreed.”

Neil nodded, too unsettled by the dip in temperature between them to press for an explanation.

“Guys?” Nicky called. “Why are we bringing Robin?”

“Does it make a difference to you?” Andrew challenged.

Nicky failed to come up with something else to say before Andrew had left the room.

That night when they left their suite, Robin was waiting in the hallway, unprepared and dressed in black jeans and a dark gray jacket zipped all the way up- Andrew must not have been motivated enough to delve into women’s fashion. Down the hall, Lizzy and Brook were leaning out of their suite's door to watch Robin curiously. Neil realized that they didn't know what this meant. The younger Foxes only knew about the infamous trips to Columbia because of vague comments or drunken, incoherent tales told by Matt or Nicky. To them, Andrew was the bored, black-clad shadow at their captain's side. Only Jack had seen what Andrew was capable of.

“Ready?” Andrew asked.

Robin eyed him warily, her shoulders inching closer and closer to her ears. “Y-yeah, I'm ready.”

Nicky nudged Neil with his elbow and said in German, “Remember when that was you?”

Neil nodded. “It's weird watching from this side of things.”

“Yeah,” Nicky laughed, throwing an arm around Neil's shoulders as they headed down the hall. “At least he bought you decent clothes. Poor girl.”
Aaron jabbed the button for the elevator and then they waited in awkward silence until the doors finally slid open. A few of the sophomores stepped out, looking oddly at them as they passed. Andrew's group and Robin stepped on and Andrew hit the button for the lobby.

Once the doors closed, Aaron said, "I assumed you knew better than to go along with strangers."

Robin’s eyes widened.

"Aaron," Nicky hissed.

"You really are bad with kids," Andrew drawled from the back corner.

It was enough to melt Aaron's cold apathy into anger. Andrew stared back at his brother, bored and unflinching. Neil exchanged a look with Nicky- it wasn't often that the twins faced off and the fact that Andrew was poking at Aaron's sore spots meant something.

"Fuck off," Aaron spat.

Andrew cocked his head. "You don't have to be here."

The words sounded casual enough, but there was ice beneath them. Aaron had been coming and going as he pleased since the twins broke off their deal, but Andrew could lock him out if he saw a good enough reason to.

Neil folded his arms over his chest tightly and pressed himself against the wall, wishing the elevator would move faster. The air was thick with the potential for an all-out war.

Robin looked at each of the four men around her and decided Nicky was safest. Quietly, she asked him, "What's in Columbia?"

"Ice cream," Nicky replied with an easy smile, "and booze. You ever been to a nightclub?"

Robin frowned. "I'm only eighteen."

"Have you ever had alcohol before?" Neil asked.

Robin stared at him and bit her lip so hard Neil half-expected to see blood well up around her front teeth. "Uh, yeah," she said. "My parents usually keep wine in the fridge."

"You like wine?"

"Not really. I just have some to help me sleep sometimes."

Nicky bobbed his head twice and then dropped the conversation. The five of them fell into a tense silence that lasted all the way out to the car. Neil climbed in next to Andrew and fiddled with the air conditioning as soon as Andrew turned the key in the ignition. Robin slid into the middle of the backseat, chewing her lip again.

As Andrew guided the Maserati toward the interstate, Neil's phone vibrated in his pocket. Fishing it out, he found a text from Kevin: *How's the new recruit?*

"Interesting," Kevin replied. *I'll call you tomorrow.*
“Great,” Neil muttered under his breath. Andrew glanced at him, so he explained, “It’s Kevin.”

“Problem?” Andrew asked as he swerved into the left lane to pass a truck.

“He’s going to call tomorrow.”

Nicky groaned at that, but Robin leaned forward between the two front seats, eyes bright with thinly-veiled excitement, and asked, “Kevin Day?”

“Yeah,” Neil replied.

“Oh, my god. I didn’t pay a ton of attention to college Exy before, but he’s, like, a legend,” she gushed.

“We know,” Nicky said dryly. “He told us many, many times.”

Neil twisted around in his seat to see her better. “Did you see our championship game against Edgar Allan?”

“I kicked my parents off the good TV,” she admitted sheepishly. “I almost threw my popcorn at it, too. That game was… incredible. You guys kicked some serious ass.”

“Yeah, we did!” crowed Nicky, clutching the back of Neil’s headrest and giving it a good shake.

“Do you think he’ll ever come back to visit? I’d love to meet him,” said Robin.

“He’s better from a distance, trust me,” Nicky told her.

Neil rolled his eyes. “He’ll come around to rip me a new one about how the team’s doing, so you’ll definitely meet him at some point.”

“He’d come back just for that?”

“Kevin prefers to criticize in person,” Neil replied blandly.

“He likes watching the light leave a person’s eyes,” Nicky stage-whispered.

Robin furrowed her brow. “He seems really nice on TV.”

Nicky patted her shoulder. “It’s all an illusion, kid.”

Aaron snorted. Neil winced. Even if Robin made serious improvements before Kevin decided to descend upon the Foxhole Court, she’d still get chewed out if she got too close. Imagining what Kevin would say, Neil felt bad for her. He remembered all too well what it was like as a freshman when Kevin Day stepped off his pedestal to crush him.

Talking about Kevin led to a more in-depth discussion about Exy. For someone who played like they’d never heard of the sport, Robin was surprisingly knowledgeable about it once Neil got her going about her favorite pro teams.

“Jeez,” laughed Nicky, “do you sleep with games on, too?”

Robin flinched. “Uh, it- sometimes, yeah. I just… like it, I guess.”

Aaron shot her a weird look and she ducked her head, picking at her close-bitten thumbnail. Nicky pressed his mouth into a flat line and looked like he regretted saying anything. Neil watched Robin
closely, confused by her reaction. She was surrounded by Exy players; admitting that she enjoyed watching the sport often shouldn’t have been embarrassing.

Before Neil knew it, Andrew was parking the Maserati outside Sweetie’s and the purpose of the evening came back to him. The five of them headed inside and Nicky went up to speak with the hostess while the rest of them waited just inside the door. Robin kept her gaze stubbornly fixed to her shoes.

Aaron left the group to go to the bathroom, so Neil grabbed the opportunity to say, “You don’t need to talk about stuff you don’t want to.”

Andrew’s eyes slid over to his.

Robin nodded without lifting her head. “I just… I’m bad at this.”

“Fight back,” Andrew said, “or they’ll walk all over you.”

Neil leaned back against the wall and studied Andrew’s stony expression. Andrew had a plan, so Neil decided to keep his mouth shut and let Andrew do what he did best.

“I know,” Robin mumbled, “but I’m-”

Andrew cut her off. “No excuses. If you’re not even willing to stand up on your own, I will leave you behind.”

Robin finally looked up, annoyed. “I didn’t ask for your help.”

“Everything about you is a cry for help,” Andrew countered smoothly. “Choice is yours, though. Tonight is the last time I’ll offer.”

Nicky wandered back over to them with a shaky smile. “The wait’ll be about twenty minutes. What are we talking about over here?”

Robin froze like a deer in headlights.

Neil piped up, “I was just telling her what we did for summer vacation. Why don’t you show her some of the pictures you and Erik took?”

Nicky’s eyes lit up and he immediately dug his phone out of his pocket. Neil figured that would last them at least twenty minutes.

By the time they were shown to their table, Nicky had moved on to telling Robin about studying abroad and living in Germany. Since no one else was willing to offer a change in subject, Nicky filled the silence with all things Erik-related. Robin took small bites of ice cream and listened politely to whatever Nicky was telling her. Neil had heard it all before, so he tuned Nicky out and sent a few texts to Matt while he waited for the others to finish eating.

Once the bill was paid, they headed back out to the car and Andrew drove them over to Eden’s, letting them out near the front door like normal. Neil watched the Maserati disappear in the direction of the parking garage and then led Robin inside to catch up to the others. Robin meekly followed him into the wall of heavy sound and flashing light; she looked fragile, like she could have dissolved right before Neil’s eyes in the thick air. Because of that, he kept an eye on her and made sure she stayed close as they looked for Nicky and Aaron.

A few awkward minutes later, Neil spotted Andrew making his way over to them and told Robin,
“Come on. We're going to get drinks.”

Robin looked confused, but she went along with him without a single complaint. Andrew paused at the top of the stairs and fell in behind Robin as Neil led the way through the crowd in the pit. Between them, Robin didn't get jostled too badly, but from the bewildered look on her face, Neil wasn't sure it made much of a difference.

When they finally reached the bar, Andrew asked her, “What do you want?”

Robin bit her lip and craned her neck to look around at what the other people were drinking. Grimacing, she said, “Just water… if that’s okay.”

Andrew turned to catch Roland’s attention. It was a minute or two before Roland finished the order he was working on. He hurried over to them with an easy grin and a, “Hey, guys. The- oh, who’s your new friend?”

“Keep it clean,” Andrew told him. “She’ll have water.”

Roland blinked and looked to Neil. When Neil didn't reply, Roland said, “Right. Okay. Water and your usual, coming right up.”

Robin moved closer to Neil to be heard above the noise. “How often do you guys come here?”

“Pretty often,” Neil answered.

“We're not driving back to campus tonight, are we? It’s already so late.”

Neil shook his head. “The cousins have a house not too far from here. We’ll drive back to campus in the morning.”

Robin shifted away from him, anxiously scanning the crowd around them again and bouncing on the balls of her feet. When Roland finally slid a tray full of drinks across the bar to Andrew, Robin’s eyes went round with shock.

“The four of you are gonna drink all that?” she asked.

“This is round one,” Andrew explained before nudging Neil with his elbow.

Neil shouldered his way through the crowd with Robin at his back and Andrew carrying the tray of drinks behind them. Eventually, they made it back to the table.

Once the drinks were before them, Aaron and Nicky started downing them immediately without paying much attention to Robin, who made it clear she wasn't going to get drunk with them. Neil handed one of the water bottles to her and took the other one for himself.

“Are you the DD?” she asked him with a hesitant hope in her eyes, as if she was finally getting a handle on how things worked.

“No, Andrew always drives.”

“But-” she paused to watch Andrew reach for a glass of whiskey. “But that’s not safe.”

“Spare us the after-school special,” Aaron said.

“It’s fine!” Nicky assured her loudly. “You’re in good hands.”
Robin looked, if anything, more uncomfortable. Safety precautions were probably recited in the Cross household like scripture after Robin was returned to them in order to avoid tempting fate again. Neil was willing to bet that Robin always looked both ways before crossing the road, always said no to drugs, always kept her distance from strangers. Second chances could be fragile, fickle things and she couldn’t afford to tempt fate after her narrow escape from danger the first time.

He didn’t bother offering any reassurances because he knew nothing would take the trembling out of her hands like experience would. She’d get through the night and she would see for herself that Andrew had a handle on things.

Halfway through the second round of drinks, Aaron was finally drunk enough to let Nicky drag him to the dance floor. Once they disappeared into the crowd, Andrew fixed Neil with a look that spoke volumes. Andrew wanted to talk to Robin alone.

Neil grabbed his bottle of water and said, “I’ll, uh, go talk to Roland.”

He left Robin with Andrew and hoped for the best. If Andrew didn’t decide to keep Robin, it wouldn’t surprise him. If he did, though, Robin’s life at Palmetto State would drastically change.

Roland was surprised to see Neil perched on a stool at the bar, but he seemed almost glad to have someone sober to chat with between orders from increasingly drunk customers. They didn’t have much to talk about, but some small talk about Roland’s night classes and the Foxes helped pass the time.

It was almost half an hour before Andrew appeared at Neil’s side with the empty tray and a calm look in his eye.

“And?” Neil asked as Roland went off to put together their next round of drinks.

Andrew stole a sip of Neil’s soda and replied, “She’s ours.”

Neil nodded, accepting instantly what this entailed. Robin was under Andrew’s protection now and Andrew wouldn’t allow anyone to shove her around anymore. The other Foxes would have to learn their lesson fast.

Andrew stepped closer and fixed him with a serious, searching look that he felt all the way to the pit of his stomach. “I’m moving her into our dorm.”

It was a simple statement, but it felt like Andrew was putting his foot forward without resting any weight on it. He was looking for Neil’s yes or no.

“Okay,” Neil said easily. “We only have room for four beds, though.”

Andrew lowered his chin and glanced at Roland to make sure he was still busy. “We’ve shared a bed before.”

Neil smirked. “If you want to sleep with me, you can just say so.”

“It’d be a permanent arrangement for the year.”

“My answer’s yes,” Neil said easily. “Do you want me to talk to Coach?”

Andrew shook his head. “I’m sure he’ll hear all about it.”

Neil took another drink and winced, thinking of the weekend ahead. “Let’s take Robin to the court
with us tomorrow night. We need to work on her game.”

He thought he heard Andrew mutter, “Junkie,” but he couldn’t be sure.
Finality

Chapter Summary

Neil struggles to accept that Andrew’s played his last game as a Fox.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings: brief mentions of a minor character with an eating disorder and a minor character on suicide watch. If I should add any other warnings, let me know and I'll fix it!

At four in the morning, Neil stood in the center of the Foxhole Court with an ache in his chest, his keys biting into his palm, and the final buzzer still ringing in his ears. The championship game had been over for hours. Another season, another year, was gone in a blink. He’d tried to savor every second, draw it out as long as he could, but it ended all the same and there was no going back now.

It was over.

Andrew played his last game as a Fox and nothing- not winning finals, not even having Matt and Kevin and the girls there to see it- could soften the blow. All through the Foxes’ after-party, Neil used what little was left of his energy to keep his composure. He wanted to break something or maybe just vomit, but his team deserved to celebrate their triumph without him ruining it. Even the Trojans put on happy faces for their sake and crowded into the basement of the Tower with the Foxes and Vixens to drink and dance to whatever music Holly and Nicky decided on.

The victory was hard-won and well-deserved. The Foxes had taken a few hits over the course of the year. In October, Tara’s health took a nosedive: an eating disorder she’d battled in middle school came back with a vengeance and she eventually decided to quit the team to focus on her health. Over Christmas break, Joel was arrested in his hometown for vandalism and charged with assaulting a police officer. Neil wasn’t sure what exactly happened to him, only that he dropped out of school. Yvonne and Jack had a falling out over something in January, and the two younger strikers lost their chemistry on the court for weeks. In March, Colby’s meds stopped working like they used to and left him stranded in a bad mental state. The junior goalkeeper spent a chunk of spring break on suicide watch. After that, Neil never saw him without Lizzy, Brian, or Brook at his side, trying to keep him afloat while he relearned how to keep his head above water.

With Tara gone and Colby benched, Robin was Andrew’s only sub for the rest of spring championships. Most of the team didn’t bother to hide their feelings about that, but Neil wasn’t all that worried and it didn’t surprise him when she didn’t disappoint. Last summer, she gave her back to Andrew and gave her game to Neil. After months of grueling night practices and sparring lessons, Robin could finally hold her own on and off the court.

The team would survive without the cousins, but Neil wasn’t so sure if he would. Foolishly, he hoped it wouldn’t be more painful than losing the others, since he knew already that he could bear it, but he was wrong. The idea of losing Andrew made him feel like he was seventeen again,
wandering alone in the dark with nothing but silence and heartache and ashes in his hair.

Andrew would move to Atlanta after graduation. He had a contract with the Buzzards, a respectable team even if they were rough around the edges. He would get an apartment, start a new life, and Neil would have to stay behind.

After all the years Andrew fought tooth and nail to just survive the day-to-day, he deserved it. Neil knew that better than anyone. Andrew deserved a comfortable home, a city without ghosts, independence. He deserved to live without the weight of other people’s lives on his shoulders.

Neil just wished it didn’t feel like the foundation of his life was crumbling. Nothing was stable anymore.

“The game’s over, Neil.”

Andrew’s voice startled him so badly he nearly yelped as he whirled around to face him. He hadn’t noticed Andrew slipping through the open court door.

“I didn’t think I’d see you out here ever again,” Neil blurted out.

Andrew’s stare was hooded and flat. Like Neil, he was in sweats and a t-shirt, dressed for bed not the court. “I didn’t think you’d mope out here for two hours.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“I figured that out on my own.”

“Good to see you putting that fancy college education to work.”

“Neil.”

Neil’s shoulders sagged and he had to look away from Andrew. “You can’t even tell we played tonight,” he said glumly. There wasn’t a single speck of evidence that Neil and Andrew had played there together. It was as empty and clean as the first time Neil laid eyes on it.

“They weren’t going to leave the mess just because you’re a sentimental moron,” Andrew replied. His eyes swept over the court, pausing momentarily on the goalkeeper’s box that was no longer his to protect. Neil was too far away to catch whatever flickered over Andrew’s face; it was there and gone in a blink before Andrew started walking toward him.

Neil shifted to one side of the fox paw logo so that Andrew could stand on it too. This was the center of Neil’s universe. He couldn’t picture any other court feeling like home.

“I don’t want it to be over,” Neil murmured.

Andrew leveled him with a dry look. “It is over.”

“I know.”

He couldn’t help feeling like the best years of his life were behind him.

Andrew shook his head as if he could read Neil’s mind. “Drama queen.”

“At least some things don’t change,” Neil grumbled.

Andrew didn’t dignify that with a response. He kept quiet while Neil pushed through the storm in
his head. Past his heartsick longing, buried beneath his fear, there was an overwhelming rush of gratitude. The last four years had been amazing. He’d gone from being a nobody with nothing to someone with everything. He had a life worth fighting for, a home to come back to, and a family even with all the miles between them all. Growing was painful, but it was worth it. In spite of the cold pit in his stomach, he realized he wouldn’t change a thing.

“Hey,” he said quietly, meeting Andrew’s eyes again. “Thank you.”

Andrew quirked an eyebrow. “For what?”

“All of it.”

Andrew was at the heart of Neil’s life and Neil loved him so fiercely it hurt sometimes. He studied Neil’s face for a moment, and then he said, “Time to go home, junkie.”

Neil nodded, knowing he’d stayed out there far too long. They’d have to get up in a few hours to head to Abby’s- Dan insisted that the old team meet up for brunch to decide what they would do together over the weekend as a group. He had that to look forward to.

He followed Andrew off their court, knowing it was for the last time, and laced their fingers together as they walked up to the foyer. Andrew kept his hand in Neil’s while they turned off the lights and locked up the doors; they didn’t let go of each other until they reached the Maserati.

As Andrew turned the key in the ignition, he said, “You left the Jaguar at the Tower. You’re going to have to drive that thing eventually.”

Neil rested his head against the dark window and said, “I know.”

His new car was the biggest, most expensive thing he owned and he couldn’t bring himself to drive it. He didn’t see a reason to when Andrew’s Maserati was always right there. The Jaguar was… nice. It had clean, sharp lines with white paint and a leather interior that smelled expensive and new. Andrew picked it out and kept the second set of keys for himself. Robin drove it to her new favorite frozen yogurt place whenever she needed time alone. Nicky sent Matt pictures until Matt gave in and flew down from Philadelphia to see it in person.

Neil hated the car a little. He couldn’t help it when it was a glaring reminder that Andrew and the Maserati wouldn’t be around much longer.

Andrew parked next to the Jaguar just to put it directly in Neil’s line of sight, but thankfully he didn’t say anything else about it.

Together they went upstairs, walking close enough that their arms brushed against each other. Neil’s exhaustion caught up to him in the elevator and he yawned wide enough to make his eyes water.

“You look tired,” Andrew commented wryly.

“Shut up,” Neil replied without any heat.

They found Robin asleep in a beanbag with an old Exy game on the television, which wasn’t unusual. Earlier in the year, Nicky tried to talk her out of doing that, but she was almost as stubborn as Andrew about certain things and this was one of them.

Neil and Andrew took turns in the bathroom, and then they slipped into the dark bedroom together.
Andrew climbed into bed first and Neil gave him a few moments to get comfortable against the wall before slipping under the covers with him. He was careful to keep at least an inch between their bodies, and soon enough he got situated with one arm tucked under his pillow.

The darkness was warm and safe. Sleep was calling to him, but there was one more thing he needed to do.

“Andrew,” he whispered.

There was a soft grunt against the pillow in response. Slowly, Neil raised up onto his elbow and lifted his other hand to find Andrew’s jaw. Knowing what Neil wanted, Andrew turned into his palm and leaned up to meet him halfway for a brief kiss. It was over in a second, but it was enough for now. There was time for more later. Satisfied, Neil let himself drift off into a dream.
Neil refused to admit he was lost.

The heat was stifling, his body was soaked with sweat, and a headache was swelling on top of his brain. None of the streets or buildings looked familiar, but he kept walking and ignored the phone in his pocket that was equipped with GPS. He’d run through plenty of cities in plenty of countries and, more often than not, he could find his way back to where he was supposed to be. He was good at remembering landmarks and main roads- or, at least, he used to be.

There was a hollow space at the back of his mind where his mother’s voice used to be. If he tried, he could imagine what she would say to him, how she would scold him for getting rusty, but he didn’t see the point in that. He wasn’t in any danger. No one was hunting him.

Panting, he turned down another sidewalk and wiped sweat from his eyes while he tried to find something, anything, that might lead him back to Andrew’s apartment. He passed a park and an aquarium. Nothing looked right.

Neil was lost.

With a defeated sigh, he pulled out his phone to look up a map.

Thirty minutes later, he was finally back at Andrew’s apartment, unlocking the front door with his shiny new key. The frigid air inside the apartment shocked his overheated body and chilled the sweat on his skin. Gasping for breath, he stumbled on rubbery legs toward the kitchen.

In the living room, the TV went quiet and Robin called, “Neil?”

“Hey, Robin,” Neil answered on his way to the kitchen. His headache was pulsing and his legs felt like rubber. The only thing in Andrew’s fridge was a few water bottles, but that was all Neil needed. He gulped water down greedily, only pausing to catch his breath.

Robin’s soft footsteps padded into the room and stopped. Neil could feel her staring at him and he almost felt guilty about being out longer than he said he’d be.

When he finished drinking, Robin asked, “Did you get lost?”

“I wasn’t lost,” he said defensively.
“You were gone a long time.”

“Were you worried?”

Her eyes widened and she shook her head. “No, no, it’s fine. I was just… wondering.”

Neil watched her tug at the edges of her purple armbands; beneath them were Andrew’s knives. He liked Robin just fine as a person and a teammate, but he couldn’t look at her without thinking of how everything was changing. It was harder now that Andrew had officially moved to Georgia.

“Andrew said he was going to stop at the grocery store on his way home,” said Robin.

Andrew didn’t mention that before he left to meet with his personal trainer, which meant Robin called him—probably because she had been worried after all. Neil suppressed a sigh. They lived in the same suite all year, were around each other almost constantly, but she still didn’t like calling him when she was anxious about his whereabouts.

“I’m gonna go shower,” he told her quietly.

She nodded and stepped aside to let him pass.

In Andrew’s bedroom, Neil stripped off his sweaty clothing and dumped it into the laundry bag hanging from the empty closet door. Their duffel bags and suitcases were piled up against one wall; there wasn’t any point in unpacking them when the only piece of furniture in the room was a king-size bed.

The apartment was in the awkward early stage of being lived in. It wasn’t completely empty—there were beds in two of the three bedrooms, a TV on the living room floor, the appliances the landlord provided—but there was still too much space. Neil had never built a home from scratch and he was overwhelmed with his running mental list of everything they needed to buy.

On the bathroom counter, Neil and Andrew’s toothbrushes stood in a coffee mug next to a bar of soap they bought at a gas station on their way into Atlanta. The bottles of shampoo and body wash were taken from their suite at the Tower.

Neil stood under the hot spray of the shower longer than he needed to. Eyes closed, he breathed in the steam and tried to let go of the tension in his shoulders. He still had a few more weeks with Andrew, and Robin was only going to be with them for three more days. Andrew would be kept busy, so Neil needed to savor the time they could actually spend together.

Eventually, Neil got out of the shower and went back into the bedroom with a towel secured around his hips to dig out some clothes from his duffel bag. The door swung open without warning, and Neil clutched his towel as he turned to tell Robin to get out. The words died on his lips when he saw Andrew step inside the room. He kicked the door shut behind him and gave Neil a quick once-over.

Relaxing, Neil said, “Didn’t think you’d be back so soon. How’d it go?”

Andrew shrugged and went to sit on the edge of the bed. “Robin said you got lost.”

Neil sighed, his pride stinging. “Yeah, I got lost.”

“Robin was worried.”

Without Andrew filtering their lies into truth, Neil didn’t know how he and Robin were going to
communicate with each other when they went back to Palmetto State.

“I was fine,” Neil muttered. He dropped his towel to pull on his underwear. “It’s not like I have enemies in Atlanta.”

“Knowing you, that probably won’t last long,” Andrew replied.

Neil couldn’t argue with that. He crossed the room to sit beside Andrew and changed the subject. “What are we doing for lunch?”

“Robin’s going to order food after she gets off the phone with her parents.”

“She’s talking to them again? They called her at breakfast.”

Andrew only shrugged. He was never interested in Robin’s parents or their habit of calling Robin at least once a day. Nicky called it sweet. Neil thought it was excessive. With the exception of on-court violence, there wasn’t anything to threaten her safety. Since the summer, she had Andrew watching her back and teaching her how to fight. Now she had his knives and the ability to defend herself.

While he puzzled over the nature of Mr. and Mrs. Cross, Andrew’s phone started buzzing in his pocket. He answered with a simple, flat, “What.”

Neil moved to the middle of the bed and lay down with his fingers laced behind his head, listening to Andrew’s voice.

“Yeah, I met with Darren,” Andrew told the person on the other end of the call. Neil guessed it was Kevin. “You’re the one that recommended him, you should know what he’s like. No, I didn’t ask him about—” Andrew stopped and pinched the bridge of his nose for a few seconds. “Because I don’t care, that’s why.”

He was definitely talking to Kevin.

“Neil and Robin are here.” Andrew glanced over at Neil. “No, Nicky and Aaron are in Columbia. Erik’s still— he’s staying until Aaron’s wedding. I don’t know why. Ask him yourself.”

Neil poked Andrew’s bare forearm with his toe. The skin between Andrew’s wrists and elbows were slightly paler than his hands, but the summer sun would correct that soon enough. He still had his armbands somewhere, but they were fraying and old. Whether or not Andrew intended to replace them was still a mystery. Neil’s weren’t in much better shape, but he didn’t wear them as often now. Sometimes it felt like the horrors in Baltimore happened to someone else, someone long gone. Occasionally, Neil woke up feeling like the wounds were fresh.

Andrew’s warm hand wrapped around Neil’s ankle and squeezed firmly. “I’m meeting with the PR person later,” he told Kevin. “I know, I- yeah, I know. Are you done? Okay.” He didn’t say goodbye before he hung up and tossed the phone onto the mattress toward the foot of the bed.

“I could find a hitman in Houston,” Neil offered wryly.

Andrew flopped down next to Neil and muttered, “Don’t tempt me.”

He tugged at Neil’s hip in a silent demand, so Neil pulled himself up and swung his leg over Andrew’s thighs. He put his elbows on the pillow, bracketing Andrew’s head, and kept his body propped up as they kissed. There wasn’t enough heat between them for it to go anywhere, but the contact and the pleasant haze it put Neil’s mind in was comforting.
They lost track of time. Andrew tasted like nicotine gum and he smelled like cheap soap. His hands slid roughly over Neil’s ribs and lower back. Neil had no idea how he was going to leave Andrew in a couple weeks. The thought made him kiss Andrew a little harder, desperate to get as much as he could in the moment. Neil stubbornly ignored the ache building in his shoulders, focusing instead on Andrew’s hands sliding over his hips and lower back. He finally sneaked one hand under Neil’s underwear to grope his ass, but sharp knocking at the door startled them apart.

“Andrew? What do you guys want to eat?” Robin asked, voice muffled.

Neil bit back a groan and rolled off Andrew.

“We’ll be out in a minute,” said Andrew.

Robin’s footsteps carried away down the hall. Neil stared up at the ceiling, willing his erection to go away. Andrew planted a hot kiss on the side of Neil’s neck as he climbed over him to stand up.

_Later, Neil told himself. We can continue this later._

They didn’t continue it later. After Andrew’s meeting, Robin wanted to go shopping for furniture, so out they went. Andrew was silent as he followed Robin through the furniture store, and Neil was too exhausted to form an opinion about what color was best and which style would suit Andrew’s new place.

That night, he and Andrew crawled into bed together and fell asleep within minutes.

The next few days were fine, mostly. While Andrew was off with his personal trainer, Neil and Robin went shopping for whatever Robin felt Andrew needed for his apartment. Neil picked out a pair of camping chairs for Andrew’s balcony, some large coffee mugs, and a bookcase.

“I’ve never seen him buy books,” Robin commented as they assembled the bookcase in the living room.

Neil didn’t say anything. Andrew had a whole box of books from Renee and Betsy and he needed a place to put all of them.

On Thursday, Neil was restless. He was eager to drop Robin off at the airport and part of him felt guilty about that. The other part was happy to have room to breathe. It wasn’t like he didn’t want her around. He just wanted more time alone with Andrew. In the beginning, he told himself that it wouldn’t be all that different from watching Andrew head off to class, but it wasn’t the same at all. Andrew wasn’t going to lectures. He was starting his new life. He was meeting with people Neil didn’t know, going to a gym Neil had only been to once out of curiosity, and training to play on a team without Neil. It all made him feel greedier than usual when Andrew was actually home. Having Robin around meant Neil had to hold himself back.

Thursday evening was quiet. Robin texted to let Andrew know she landed safely. Nicky and Matt texted Neil like they did almost every day: Matt was having a dilemma over whether or not it was too soon to want kids and Nicky was stressed out about how little Aaron was worrying about his own wedding.

Both of them asked little questions here and there about how Neil and Andrew’s relationship was holding up. They usually didn’t bother Neil, but on Thursday night, when they were alone and Andrew was staring blankly at the wall, the questions dug under his skin. It felt like everyone had decided that Neil-and-Andrew had an expiration date.

Nicky told him repeatedly that long-distance relationships were difficult. Matt assured him that
Andrew wasn’t the only person in the world for him. Dan promised that Neil would be okay if their relationship didn’t survive. Allison didn’t offer reassurances or words of wisdom: she only asked if Neil and Andrew would be open to sleeping with other people while they were living apart. Neil didn’t know how to respond to that.

Neil knew what he wanted. He wouldn’t let go of Andrew unless Andrew told him to.

On Friday, he woke up feeling eager for the weekend. They didn’t have any plans, but that’s what made it so appealing. Andrew wouldn’t have to meet with his trainer or his managers or anyone else. Neil didn’t care if they slept Saturday and Sunday away so long as they were together.

Instead of running on a treadmill in the fitness center at Andrew’s apartment complex, Neil went for a run outside. He’d spent the week driving around with Robin and he felt confident that he could find his way around without getting lost again.

After he ran six miles, he slowed to a walk and decided to explore the area a little more just to kill some time. The temperature had dipped enough to be comfortable and there was a gauzy blanket of clouds blocking the sun. Neil wandered down wide roads lined with shopping centers and restaurants, he cut down side streets with barber shops and diners, and eventually he ended up at a park.

A narrow lane sloped down past a parking area toward tennis courts and baseball diamonds. Neil paused to watch a group of kids play a casual game of baseball. A girl stood on the mound and kicked at the dirt while she waited for a boy with a bat and a helmet to take his place at home plate.

A minute later, the girl pitched, the boy swung, and the ball cracked off the bat and went sailing out into the field. The cheering and shouting swelled as the boy took off toward first base and the kids on the other team scrambled to get the ball.

Neil’s ringtone dragged his attention away. Andrew was calling, which was odd since it was barely nine o’clock and he usually didn’t get out of the gym until the afternoon.

“Yeah?” Neil answered.

“Where are you?” asked Andrew.

“I went out for a run.”

“You don’t sound like you were running.”

“I decided to walk around for a bit.”

“It’s supposed to storm,” said Andrew. Then came a slightly accusatory, “You’re lost again.”

“I’m not lost.” Neil turned and headed across the parking lot. “I stopped to watch a baseball game. Are you home already?”

“I only had one meeting. I’m not going to the gym today.” On Andrew’s end, a car door pulled shut. Then, Andrew added, “You hate baseball.”

“Just wanted to see if that changed.”

“It hasn’t changed,” Andrew muttered. Keys jangled and a car engine growled to life. “Which park are you at?”
“I didn’t catch the name, but it’s past that fish sculpture Robin likes.”

“I’m on my way.”

“I’m heading back toward Peachtree.”

Andrew made a little noise of acknowledgement. They both fell quiet, but neither of them hung up. Neil knew Andrew could probably hear his breathing quicken as he picked up the pace, just like Neil could hear the faint chatter of Andrew’s radio. *This is what it’ll be like*, he told himself. A scrap of each other’s world here and there via phone call or text.

“How’d your meeting go?” Neil asked when he turned the corner and continued down the busy road. He knew without seeing that Andrew’s Maserati was somewhere in the sea of cars, several stoplights down.

“I have to do media training,” Andrew answered.

“You agreed to that?”

“It’s part of the job.”

Neil remembered the Andrew who would have cackled, bright-eyed and manic, at the suggestion.

Sweat rolled down the back of Neil’s neck as he walked along the sidewalk, scanning the cars for the familiar shape of the Maserati.

A few blocks down, stopped at a red light, Neil finally saw it. Ignoring the “DO NOT WALK” sign, he sprinted across the crosswalk as soon as he was sure the way would be clear of cars for a few seconds. One honked at him anyway. Andrew saw him coming and popped the locks. In the seconds before the light turned green, Neil slid into the passenger seat and breathed out a sigh of relief as cool air conditioning washed over his sweaty body.

They dropped their phones into the cup holders and Andrew drove forward with the rest of traffic. “If you take your shoes off, you will walk home,” he threatened.

“I’m surprised you can smell anything after all that smoking,” Neil grumbled as he swiped a half-full water bottle off the floor. His feet were achy and swollen, but he left his shoes on.

The apartment still felt too big and too new, but Neil was learning every corner and quirk of the place. It was starting to feel like somewhere to settle instead of a temporary shelter.

He kicked off his shoes by the door and padded back to their bedroom to shower and change. Ten minutes later, he came back out in a t-shirt and boxer shorts, hair still dripping, and joined Andrew in the living room to watch the news.

Later, they made lunch together and sat on the floor with their backs against the couch, their plates and glasses on the carpet between them, and an old game show on TV. Andrew hadn’t bothered to turn on any lights since he’d gotten in the habit of relying on the natural light that usually washed in through the windows.

The brewing storm darkened everything.

When they were done eating, Neil took their dishes to the kitchen and came back with a six-pack of beer. He paused briefly at the light switch, but there was something peaceful about the midday darkness even as thunder rumbled through the thick clouds. Neil didn’t want to break that up with
bright artificial lights. Andrew said nothing about it as Neil sat down beside him again.

Partway through his second beer, Neil was distracted by raindrops splattering on the balcony and running down the glass. The wind blew harder, smearing the watery rivulets to one side. A weather alert popped up on the bottom of the television screen, warning of a severe thunderstorm; their part of the map was colored in red. Neil knew if it got worse, if the clouds began to rotate, they’d have to get up and go downstairs to find shelter. For now, though, they were relatively safe.

The alcohol made everything feel soft and warm. He wasn’t drunk—he was still alert enough to be in control of himself—but his mind was loose enough for him to notice the gentle rasp of the carpet under his bare feet when he moved, the cool air on his bare calves, and the way Andrew’s hand curled lazily around his beer can. Neil’s focus got caught on Andrew’s scarred knuckles, the prominent vein snaking down to his wrist, and the lazy tap of his thumb against the side of the can.

Neil’s mouth went dry and he looked up at Andrew’s profile. All week, Andrew wore a pinched expression and carried too much tension in his shoulders. The move to Atlanta and the drastic change in his life was exhausting, mentally and physically, and Neil was still wrapping his head around it too, so they hadn’t done much beyond kissing and lazy handjobs in bed.

But things felt different now. They had a whole weekend ahead of them. Andrew was relaxed, loose-limbed and soft around the eyes.

A sharp crack of thunder jumpstarted Neil’s heart, and then he reached out to trace the hard point of Andrew’s elbow. He watched his fingertips slip up beneath Andrew’s sleeve instead of meeting Andrew’s hard stare. Slowly, he wrapped his hand around Andrew’s thick bicep and gave a gentle tug. Andrew took Neil’s beer and set it aside with his own, out of the way where they wouldn’t knock the cans over, before leaning in to catch Neil’s lips in a kiss. It was easy, familiar—they’d been kissing each other for years—but it still sparked heat in Neil’s veins. There was a part of him that worried a lifetime of this wouldn’t be enough, and it made him wonder if he should be ashamed of his own greed, but then Andrew deepened the kiss and Neil was convinced he wasn’t alone in wanting more.

They curled toward each other. Neil’s shoulder was uncomfortably scrunched against the couch and one leg was awkwardly folded beneath him, but he didn’t care. He dug his hands into Andrew’s hair to pull him closer as the kiss grew urgent. His heart quickened and desire rushed through him as he eagerly waited for Andrew’s direction; his thighs tensed in preparation for Andrew’s rough order to go to the bedroom.

Andrew nipped at Neil’s lower lip and said, “Go get the lube and a condom.”

Neil blinked at him, flushed and fogged over. “What?”

“Go on.” Andrew gave his chest a little shove.

“Um, okay.”

Confused, Neil got to his feet and went to the bedroom to fetch the lube and box of condoms from where they were tucked under the bed. When he returned, he froze at the edge of the living room carpet. Andrew was still sitting on front of the couch, but he was shirtless and slouched enough that he could comfortably shove his jeans and underwear down to his knees. His hooded stare was on the television, which was now displaying a tornado watch and news footage of the storm, and his hand was lazily stroking his half-hard cock. The rain beat heavily against the windows; the wind pushed at the glass as if it wanted in.
Neil swallowed hard and padded over to stand at Andrew’s side. This felt new. He wasn’t sure what was expected or wanted of him. Andrew tipped his head back against the couch cushion and gave Neil a slow once-over that he felt down to his core. Then, he said lowly, “Take your clothes off.”

Dropping the items in his hands, Neil yanked off his shirt and then dropped his boxers. Nudity in the open space was weird and it made him feel vulnerable, but the windows were blurred with rain and the walls were thick. He supposed there was no need to lock themselves away in the bedroom when the entire apartment was empty and all Andrew’s.

Andrew reached up to slide his hand behind Neil’s right knee and tugged firmly. Uncertain, Neil shifted all his weight to his left foot. With a heavy look, Andrew dragged his hand down Neil’s calf to his ankle and pulled it over his lap until Neil got the message. He straddled Andrew’s legs, dropped to his knees, and immediately ducked down for another heated kiss. At first, he was careful to keep most of his weight off Andrew while they reignited what they started before with slow, hot kisses, but Andrew squeezed his hips and pulled him closer. Instantly, Neil moved forward until he was seated snugly over Andrew’s hips. Arousal tightened in his groin and simmered in his blood, but he reminded himself to be cautious.

He broke the kiss with a wary, “Andrew.”

“It’s just yes,” Andrew murmured, leaning forward to bite the column of Neil’s throat.

“But-”

Andrew grabbed Neil’s chin and tilted his face down so he could see the dark sincerity in his eyes. “It’s yes until I say no.”

Neil wanted to argue- it was more change, a risk he didn’t want to take- but he closed his mouth without saying anything. He knew he could trust Andrew with this even if it put a spike of apprehension through his chest. Andrew would say no if he didn’t want something. He wouldn’t let Neil fall onto the list of men who hurt him.

Neil couldn’t tell if it was the growl of thunder or the weight of Andrew’s gaze that made his heart shiver.

“Okay.” A small word, whispered against Andrew’s jaw. He trailed kisses down Andrew’s neck until he found the spot that always made Andrew’s breath hitch. Sure enough, Andrew’s breathing stuttered, his hands clenched around Neil’s hips, and his head fell back against the cushion. Neil took that as encouragement and lingered on the spot, scraping his teeth lightly over the sensitive skin and soothing the sting away with his lips and tongue. He was close enough to hear the way the air got tangled in Andrew’s lungs and a little noise got caught in his throat. Andrew shifted his hips up, seeking friction. Neil hummed contentedly and pressed down against him; he continued subtly rocking against Andrew while they kissed deeply and relearned as much of each other’s bodies as they could. Andrew ran his hot palms over Neil’s thighs, up his ribs, and over his scarred back. Neil traced the bumpy ridges of scar tissue along Andrew’s forearms, dug his fingers into Andrew’s muscled shoulders, and pinched Andrew’s nipple while he was busy mouthing at the Neil’s old bullet wound- Neil was slightly smug when that made Andrew’s hips jerk upward.

As much as Neil enjoyed running his hands over Andrew’s body and trying to make Andrew gasp or twitch with pleasure, he couldn’t ignore his painfully hard erection, which was trapped with Andrew’s between their stomachs. While he continued to suck a bruise into Andrew’s hard shoulder, he groped around on the floor until his hand landed on the bottle of lube. He tapped Andrew’s forearm with it and Andrew understood immediately.
Their chests pressed together as Andrew opened the lube behind Neil’s back. Neil squirmed restlessly, shifting his legs wider apart and draping his arms over Andrew’s shoulders, until he finally felt Andrew’s finger press inside him. He groaned softly into Andrew’s hair; an answering noise rumbled in Andrew’s throat.

Andrew worked him open with shallow thrusts of his fingers. Neil was wound up enough that every curl of slick fingers made the air in lungs feel thick and hot, electrified and humid. His head was almost too muddled to wonder if Andrew intended to stay in that position. Before he could ask, Andrew withdrew his fingers and said, “Condom.”

Breathless, Neil snatched up the condom from the floor and tore it open. Andrew relaxed beneath him, head resting on the cushion and hands loose on Neil’s thighs; his hooded eyes lazily wandered over Neil’s face and chest. Sweat was gathering between Neil’s inner thighs and Andrew’s sides. A hard pulse of heat jolted through Neil’s belly. His fingers were clumsy. He raised up onto his knees so he could roll the condom onto Andrew’s cock, giving it a teasing squeeze at the base once he was done. Andrew let out a low noise, either appreciative or chiding, and grabbed Neil’s hips as they both shifted into place. When Neil felt Andrew’s blunt tip press against his ass, he looked up for confirmation that Andrew still wanted this. Lightning flickered outside, casting sharp light over Andrew’s face: his hair was disheveled from Neil’s hands, his lips were dark and shiny from Neil’s kisses. They watched each other for a long moment. Then, Andrew’s hands tightened around his hips and pressed down, just enough for Neil to get the idea of what he wanted.

Neil reached under his leg to hold Andrew’s dick in place as he lowered himself onto it. His muscles burned as he sank slowly; his thighs quivered and stomach clenched. It all felt too tight, too hot, at first until Andrew gruffly reminded him to breathe. By the time Neil was seated snugly in Andrew’s lap with Andrew fully inside him, he was lightheaded and too warm to remember the chill in the room.

Andrew pulled him in for a bruising kiss before he started to move. It was awkward at first- Neil was used to being on his back and letting Andrew take him apart. His back was stiff and his hips jerked too hard the first time Andrew’s cock slid into him at just the right angle. He half-expected Andrew to flip him onto the carpet and take control of the entire process, but instead he waited and watched and took slow, deliberate breaths while Neil figured it out.

After a few careful rolls of his hips, experimental up-and-downs, he let himself focus more on the mounting pleasure and the sparks ignited by Andrew’s fingers as they crept up his thighs. Once Andrew wrapped a hand around his dick and began stroking him in time with the pace he set, Neil stopped thinking entirely. The sensations overwhelmed his mind, washing away his worry and leaving only instinct behind.

The grunts and bitten-off groans coming from Andrew were nearly drowned out by Neil’s own harsh breathing and the storm raging over the city. Neil pried his eyes open to look down at him. The heat in his gut was now a fire licking up his ribs and he wanted to make sure Andrew was burning too. He tilted forward, pushing his weight more onto his knees, and used the extra leverage to rock down onto Andrew’s lap harder. The startled puff of Andrew’s moan against his lips was something he wanted to remember for a long time. Neil kissed him and tried to lick more noises out of his mouth. Andrew’s hands slid down to his ass and grabbed him hard, subtly pushing and pulling to help Neil keep his rhythm. Neil kept one hand cupped around Andrew’s neck and used the other to stroke himself. Something deep within him curled tighter and tighter until it snapped suddenly, tipping him over the edge into the freefall of relief. He spilled over his fist, onto Andrew’s stomach, and choked on Andrew’s name. A second later, Andrew’s hips bucked up into him, and then Andrew was shuddering too.
Thunder shook through the apartment as they gasped for air together. Neil glanced over his shoulder to make sure the television was still on, the only indicator that the power was still on. At the bottom of the screen, the severe thunderstorm warning and tornado watch were still displayed next to the angry red map. Andrew’s fingers dragged lines through the sweat coating Neil’s back, pulling his attention away from the screen. Neil leaned in before Andrew hooked a finger under his chin and their lips met halfway. They traded languid, smoldering kisses while their bodies cooled and their senses knit back together. Under Neil’s palm, Andrew’s heart thudded and gradually slowed to its resting rate.

Eventually, they were soft and shivering. The thought of staying locking together for a few minutes or hours or days was spoiled by the reality of dried cum, sweat, and lube sticking to their skin and muscle cramps. Andrew grabbed the base of the condom as Neil gingerly pulled off of him. Both of them grunted in discomfort. Neil’s knees popped as he stood up; Andrew rubbed at his neck and winced slightly.

Sheets of rain fell between Andrew’s apartment and the rest of Atlanta; thunder and lightning battled overhead. There was the chance of a blackout, of trees falling, of clouds twisting into sinister funnels. There was always something lurking on the sidelines. There was no guarantee that things would end well.

Neil stared out into the storm with a calm heart. They’d been through worse.

Andrew trailed his fingertips across his lower back. Without hesitating, Neil turned and followed him away from the dark windows.
Commitment

Chapter Summary

The Foxes get together to attend Aaron and Katelyn's wedding.

Chapter Notes

Thank you so so much for your kudos, comments, and messages on Tumblr!! You guys are wonderful <3

Neil woke up with a stabbing pain in his skull and hot, bubbling nausea brewing in his stomach. His skin was too hot and sticky with sweat. His mouth felt like it was lined with sandpaper. The ceiling of Andrew’s old bedroom was blurry until he blinked a few times. It took him three swallows to get his tongue unglued from the roof of his mouth. Next to him, Andrew sighed heavily in his sleep.

The world tilted as Neil tried to sit up.

Last night came back to him in pieces: Nicky and Matt laughing, brightly-colored drinks, Andrew supporting his weight as they searched for the car.

Aaron’s bachelor party.

Neil put his hand on the nightstand and nodded to himself. Last night was Aaron’s bachelor party. That explained why he felt the way he did.

“So you survived,” Andrew mumbled.

Neil meant to say “not really” but all that came out was: “Nngh.”

“Go eat something,” Andrew said as he rolled onto his stomach and got comfortable again.

Food sounded like a good idea wrapped in a bad one. His stomach rolled as he shuffled to the door. First thing he did was amble to the bathroom to relieve himself and rub cold water all over his face. Then, he alternated between gulping down handfuls of water and dry heaving before he finally brushed his teeth.

Down in the kitchen, Kevin was standing at the counter with a cup of coffee and a vacant expression. His t-shirt was inside out and some of his greasy hair was stuck to his forehead. He looked more like the guy Neil used to room with and less like the star athlete who appeared on talk shows and glossy magazine pages.

“He’s rebooting,” Nicky said, coming up behind Neil in the doorway. “Let’s hope his sense of humor gets an update.”

Kevin lifted his middle finger in their direction.
“Is there food?” Neil asked.

Nicky patted his shoulder and stepped around him to get into the kitchen. “We’ll send someone out for some food in a bit. How’re you feeling?”

“Like I’ve started decomposing,” Neil replied honestly.

Nicky gave him a sympathetic half-smile. “Worth it, though.”

“Yeah, right,” Neil scoffed. “We didn’t have to get trashed before Matt’s wedding.”

“Matt’s been a boring old married person for, like, four years. Besides, Dan made us promise not to get too crazy. Katelyn lacks foresight, so we got to have an actual party.”

Neil grimaced. He hated himself for letting Nicky talk him into drinking. “Come oooon,” Nicky had said. “This might be our last boys’ night for a long time!”

Kevin turned to fix Nicky with a dull look and said, “Last night wasn’t a party, it was a near-death experience.”

“That’s because you tried to outdrink a very tall, very buff European man,” Nicky said with a sigh. He handed Neil a glass of water and added, “It was just sad, Kevin. Your alcohol tolerance ain’t what it used to be.”

The front door slammed shut and Erik came into the kitchen in nothing but a pair of running shorts and tennis shoes, flushed and grinning. “How are my little Americans doing?” he teased.

Kevin could only manage a weak glare. The smell of Erik’s sweat made Neil’s stomach clench with the urge to vomit.

Nicky tilted his face up to meet Erik halfway for a kiss. “We’re doing fine. How was the run?”

“Good. Is anybody hungry yet?”

“If you buy us food, I’ll love you forever,” Nicky told him, batting his eyelashes.

“You’ll do that either way,” Erik chuckled, leaning in to press another kiss to Nicky’s cheek. “I’ll have a quick shower, then I’ll go. Make me a list?”

Nicky nodded. “You got it. Thanks, babe.”

Neil moved out of Erik’s way to avoid smelling him again as he passed. He finished his water and then refilled his glass in the sink. Nicky silently pointed him toward the bottle of aspirin on the counter.

Kevin finished his cup of coffee and immediately poured himself another. “How are you so alert, Nicky? You were drinking with us.”

Nicky shrugged. “I had tons of Gatorade and leftover pizza before I went to bed like a responsible adult. And I’m not a pro athlete so I never tried to give up drinking, unlike some people.”

“Whatever. I’m gonna go lie down.” Kevin shuffled out of the room and took his coffee with him. Neil wondered if he would be able to successfully hide his hangover from Thea when she arrived.

Matt came stumbling into the kitchen with a miserable groan and a hand over his eyes. “Lights,” he groaned. “Why?”
Nicky bit back a laugh and went to flick the lights off. Matt lowered his hand and blinked groggily at the two of them. “Fuck. What time is it?”


“Welcome back to the land of the living,” said Nicky. “You want coffee or water first?”

Matt leaned into the counter and dry-swallowed two aspirin. “I think I need an IV. What the hell was I drinking last night?”

“It was pink. That’s all I know,” Nicky told him as he wrote something down on a little notepad. “How many things of fries should we get?”

“Bugh, don’t talk to me about food,” Matt said. “Not until my stomach returns to its assigned seat.”

Nicky ignored him. “Neil, you want your usual?”

“Sure.”

“Okay. I’m gonna go suffer through Kevin’s rant about the evils of fast food and try to figure out what he wants. You two keep each other alive while I’m gone.”

After he left, Neil and Matt fixed themselves cups of coffee and ended up standing at the sink together. Through the window, they watched the man next door try to start up his lawn mower without any success.

“Oh, that’s what I forgot to do,” Matt murmured.

“Huh?”

Matt nodded toward the man as he kicked one of the lawn mower’s wheels in frustration. “The lawn. I told Dan I’d take care of it this week. Oops.”

“Oh.”

“It’s weird having my own house. So much shit to keep track of.”

Neil hummed in agreement and sipped his coffee.

Aaron made his way into the kitchen with a queasy look on his face. He didn’t acknowledge Neil or Matt as he took some aspirin and washed it down with water. Then, he planted himself in front of the coffee pot and filled up two mugs for himself.

Nicky came back and shook his head at his cousin. “And that’s why I told Katelyn to schedule the ceremony for the afternoon.”

“I hate you,” Aaron grumbled.

“Just remember all the good times we had last night.”

Aaron turned his head to scowl at Nicky. “I can’t remember shit from last night.”


“I hate you.”
Nicky rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. What do you want to eat? Erik’s going out to get food.”

Aaron put his elbows on the counter and rubbed his hands over his face with a long, miserable groan.

“Burger and fries it is,” Nicky said. “Matt?”

“A salad, I guess.”

“You want grilled chicken on it?”

“Sure.”

Nicky jotted it down and went off to find Erik. An awkward silence descended over the kitchen until Matt broke it with, “Hey, you’re getting married today, dude.”

“Not if I die first,” Aaron croaked hoarsely. “Ugh, I’m going back to my room. Text me when the food gets here.”

Erik finished showering a few minutes later and then he left with Nicky’s list of fast food orders. Matt wandered off to the den to watch some TV with Nicky while Kevin took his shower. Neil stayed in the kitchen, listening to the muffled sounds of the television and the rush of water in the pipes. Slowly, his head stopped pounding and he was able to savor the contentment that came from having people he considered family close by. He couldn’t wait to see the others.

The doorbell rang and Nicky shouted, “I’ll get it!”

Neil assumed it was Erik until the door closed and the entryway stayed quiet. Curious, he went out to see what was going on and found Nicky rifling through a large padded envelope that was stuffed with papers. When he found what he was searching for, he turned his back toward Neil to look at it privately. His shoulders were trembling.

“Nicky?”

Nicky spun and caught Neil up in a fierce hug, letting the envelope fall to the floor. Neil’s foot got caught behind Nicky’s ankle and they stumbled into the wall as Nicky shrieked with laughter.

“The fuck, Nicky?” Neil demanded as he tried to wriggle out of his grasp.

From the den’s doorway, Matt asked, “What’s going on?”

“I got my visa!” Nicky shouted, right next to Neil’s ear. “I got myfucking visa. I’m going back to Germany!”

Strong hands pulled Nicky and Neil apart. Andrew gave Nicky a warning look and took the passport out of his hands to flip through it. Neil peeked at the multi colored visa stickers with Nicky’s photo and information printed on them. A couple had stamps from Nicky’s travels. One was recently issued.

Nicky could hardly contain his grin. Matt hugged him and said, “Congrats, bro. This is awesome.”

Neil felt a stab of something bittersweet as Matt teased Nicky about how much packing he would have to do. Nicky’s elation was infectious, but the flat look in Andrew’s eyes as he studied the visa was sobering.

“What’s all the noise?” Aaron asked as he came down the stairs.
Nicky stopped mid-sentence; his smile dimmed as he looked between his cousins. Andrew held the passport out and Aaron came closer to read it. The corner of his mouth twitched like he wanted to frown but decided against it. Finally, he said, “Cool,” and went down the hall to the den.

After a beat of heavy silence, Matt shook Nicky’s shoulder and beamed at him. “I’m so happy for you, man. I know you’ve been waiting forever for this.”

Nicky chuckled and rubbed at his watery eyes.

Andrew met Neil’s eyes and flicked a significant look toward the kitchen.

Neil tapped Matt’s bicep and said, “Coffee?”

“Oh, yeah, sure,” Matt replied, glancing at Andrew.

They left Andrew and Nicky alone in the entryway. Neil hoisted himself up to sit on the kitchen counter and tried to ignore the vague twist of anxiety in his gut. For all that the cousins had been through together, they still rarely said what needed to be said.

Matt quietly asked, “Do you think the twins are gonna be okay?”

Neil shrugged and knocked his heel against the cupboard door. “They knew it was coming. They were there when Nicky sent off his application.”

“Yeah, but now it’s real. Nicky’s leaving.”

“They’re all leaving. Andrew’s in Atlanta, Aaron’s going off to Chicago.” Neil went quiet and frowned. He still couldn’t believe he was the oldest Fox on the team. Time had slipped away from him.

“Hey.” Matt nudged him with his elbow. “Don’t do that.”

“What?”

“The thing where you get all sad.”

“This might be the last time the cousins are here together,” Neil pointed out. Saying it made his heart feel tight.

“Do you think they’re gonna get rid of this place?”

Neil didn’t know. This house was where Nicky and the twins found their footing as an odd little family. This was their home. Neil didn’t want to think of other people moving in and changing everything.

Kevin came in rubbing a towel over his wet hair. “Is the food here yet?”

“No,” answered Matt.

“What’s up with Nicky and Andrew?”

Neil said, “Nicky’s visa came in the mail.”

“Oh.” Kevin blinked in surprise. “Good for him.”

There was some more excited shouting from Nicky when Erik got back. Andrew carried the sacks
of food into the kitchen with Aaron right behind him. They divided the food into separate piles and began eating without bothering to move to a different room. Neil chewed his fries slowly, hoping to keep everything down, and listened to Andrew answer Kevin’s questions about how the Buzzards were shaping up. Aaron finished his lunch first and went to take a shower just as Nicky and Erik finally came in to eat. They were both grinning as they leaned against the counter side by side.

Neil didn’t get a chance to speak to Andrew alone after that in spite of his best efforts. Andrew was already in his suit and out of the bedroom by the time Neil was done in the shower. When Neil finished getting dressed, Andrew was on the phone with Betsy to make sure she knew where the venue was located. Neil tried to wait for him to finish talking to her, but Nicky dragged him away to fix his hair.

At twelve thirty, Kevin took Neil’s car to pick up Thea at the airport and the rest of them split up between Nicky’s rental car and the Maserati to drive to the wedding venue. They parked outside a large wooden pavilion with gauzy white curtains shifting in the gentle breeze. Inside, there were rows of white-painted chairs facing a wrought iron arch draped in white and adorned with purple flowers. There were ceiling fans, too, which would help combat the muggy July heat.

They followed a sidewalk that led around to the front entrance of the main hall. Off the entryway, there were a few rooms and a spiral staircase going up to the second floor. Straight back, they found the main reception area and the bar, where a few of Katelyn’s relatives and her parents were talking and laughing loudly.

Katelyn’s mother Helen noticed them first. She rushed over and threw her arms around Aaron, crying, “I can’t believe the big day is finally here! How are you feeling? You’re not getting cold feet, are you?”

“I’m all right,” Aaron answered, taking a small step back and straightening his tie.

“How’s our girl doing?” asked Nicky.

Helen blinked back tears. “Oh, she’s so beautiful. Amy’s putting the finishing touches on her hair right now. I’ll tell her you all made it here okay. I just have to make a quick phone call; Pastor Jeffords is having some car trouble.”

“Okay,” said Nicky. “Let me know if you need anything.”

She nodded and carefully wiped the corner of her eye. As soon as she was down the hallway, Nicky and Aaron exchanged annoyed looks.

“She’s gonna be your mother-in-law in a few hours,” Nicky stage-whispered.

“Just got over my hangover and I already need another drink,” Aaron muttered as he headed toward the bar.

Matt frowned. “She seemed nice.”

“She’s just excited about the big day,” Nicky said, mimicking her tone. “Katelyn’s parents offered to help her pay for med school if she put the wedding off for a few years. I think they were hoping she’d find someone else if she waited.”

“Maybe they just wanted her to focus on her education?”

Erik rubbed Nicky’s shoulder sympathetically as Nicky shook his head. “Yeah, no. I thought so too
until I found out that they kept inviting Grant around. Helen and Paul love Grant. Grant is so helpful and perfect and he knows the people who own this place, so he got them a discount. Grant also helped Helen pick out a photographer and check out florists—oh, and did I mention he was Katelyn’s high school sweetheart? There are still pictures of them together framed in Helen and Paul’s living room. Guess how many they have of Aaron.”

“Ouch,” Matt hissed. “Poor Aaron. That’s gotta sting.”

“Aaron’s used to dealing with assholes,” Andrew said.

“What’re you trying to say, Minyard?” Wymack gruffly asked as he and Abby approached the group.

“That you’re an asshole,” Andrew replied without hesitating.

Abby shook her head at the two of them and went around the group to hug everyone.

Wymack and Andrew stared each other down. To someone who didn’t know better, it might’ve looked like they hated one another. Wymack ended their staring contest by asking, “You break any of your new teammates yet?”

Andrew said, “You would’ve heard about it if I had.”

Wymack nodded and looked at Neil. “How wrecked is your liver from last night?”

“Not as wrecked as Aaron’s,” Matt laughed.

Abby clucked her tongue disapprovingly when she spotted Aaron at the bar with Katelyn’s father. “Why is he drinking, then? He’s gonna make himself sick.”

“He’s a grown man,” said Wymack. “If he wants to start his honeymoon with his head in the toilet, that’s his choice.”

Allison’s voice carried down the hallway. "It's, what, seven over there? Have you eaten dinner yet?" She followed Dan into the room with her phone pressed to her ear. “Well, why not? You’ve been working for, like, ten hours.”

Dan grinned as she strode over to the group. “Aww, you guys look so good!” She squeezed Neil’s shoulders in a one-armed hug before leaning up to greet Matt with a quick kiss. “Weddings are way less stressful when they’re not mine.”

Matt put his arm around her bare shoulders. “Ours wasn’t that bad. Allison and Renee did most of the stressing.”

“You better be taking care of yourself,” Allison said to whoever she was on the phone with. “I swear, Renee, I will come over to Zambia and kick your ass if you work yourself to death. The Peace Corps will not have peace if it comes to that.”

“Such love,” Dan joked dryly. “By the way, Renee wants us to take as many pictures and videos as we can and email them to her.”

Nicky gave her a lazy salute before posing so Erik could snap a picture of him on his phone.

Allison wrapped up her call with Renee and tucked her phone into her slim handbag. After she hugged Abby hello, she looked over the group with narrowed eyes. “Where’s Kevin and Thea?”
Nicky checked the time on Erik’s phone. “They should’ve been here by now. I told Kevin how to get here, like, three times. I watched him write it down. Coach, your son is stressing me out.”

Wymack spread his hands, asking, “What do you want me to do? Ground him?”

Robin poked her head through the doorway and then she came jogging out to them, barefoot in her dark purple bridesmaid dress. Her earrings flashed in the light and her skirt swished around her brown calves as she darted between tables. When she reached them, Andrew gave her the flask from his jacket pocket.

“Helen is driving me nuts,” she told them breathlessly. “She keeps saying that Katelyn’s makeup is too light and the bouquet is wrong and the cake looks lopsided. All her nitpicking is freaking Katelyn out. I keep telling them both that everything is fine, but Helen’s convinced I’m only saying that to be nice.”

Allison raised an eyebrow at Dan.

“Allison and I will go check it out and we’ll talk to Katelyn,” Dan told Robin.

“Thank you,” Robin called after them. She took a swig from Andrew’s flask and made a face; she still hadn’t developed a taste for whiskey.

Nicky asked, “Where’s Jess? She’s the maid of honor. She should be on Helen duty.”

“Jess is busy coming up with mindless tasks to keep Grant occupied so Katelyn won’t have to deal with him.”

“Ugh,” Nicky groaned. “Why is he even here?”

Erik rubbed Nicky’s back. “It’ll be over soon. Deep breaths.”

“Andrew could make Grant go away,” Matt said. “Fifty bucks says he could do it in under twenty minutes.”

Nicky scoffed. “Ye of little faith. Give him your pocket knife and he could do it in five.”

“Lord have mercy,” sighed Wymack. “Abby, let’s go get something to drink.”

Wymack headed straight for Aaron, who was still trapped in a conversation with Katelyn’s father, while Abby ordered their drinks. Aaron was visibly relieved when Wymack interrupted to introduce himself and Abby to Katelyn’s family members.

“Oh, Robin, there you are!” a man called as he came into the room. “Helen’s looking for you.”

Robin pressed her lips into a thin line. She passed the flask back to Andrew and said, “Okay, Grant,” before trudging away to find Helen.

Grant had cropped brown hair, suntanned skin, and an unnaturally white smile that he flashed at the group. He pointed a finger at Andrew and asked, “Hey, are you Aaron’s brother?”

Nicky rubbed his mouth, mumbling, “No shit. They’re identical.”

Grant didn’t hear him. “Your name’s Andrew, right? It’s great to finally meet you. I’m Grant Hayworth.”

Andrew slowly screwed the cap back on his flask and cocked his head in Neil’s direction. “This is
Neil Josten.”

“Hey, man,” Grant beamed. “It’s awesome to meet more of Aaron’s friends.”

Neil folded his arms over his chest. “You’re Katelyn’s ex-boyfriend.”

“Ah, yes. Guilty as charged,” he chuckled sheepishly.

“You must feel pretty awkward here.”

Grant shrugged nonchalantly. “Not really.”

“You sure?” Neil asked with a hard edge in his voice. He knew there wasn’t a competition- Katelyn wasn’t going to change her mind- but he’d still side with Aaron over a stranger any day. The others stared at Grant in silence, closing ranks in typical Fox fashion.

Finally, Grant took the hint and stepped backward. “Right, uh, I should... I’m gonna go say hi to Paul.”

Neil watched him retreat to the bar. When Grant said hello to Katelyn’s father, it gave Aaron a chance to break away with Abby and Wymack. They returned to the group with their drinks even though Abby said they ought to be mingling with other members of Katelyn’s family.

Dan and Allison returned not too long later, just before Kevin and Thea arrived. More of Katelyn’s guests showed up and wandered into the hall, buzzing with excitement. Neil kept an eye on the doorway until Betsy came in, frazzled but smiling. She gave Aaron a hug first and murmured something to him. Then, she gently touched Andrew’s shoulder and said, “I’m glad you decided to come.”

Aaron glanced at Neil when Betsy said it. He showed up at the Tower in the middle of June to ask Neil in person for his help. He wanted Andrew at his wedding, but Andrew was stubborn and he’d never stopped disliking Katelyn. It took Neil two days of negotiating to get him to say yes.

Ten minutes before the ceremony was supposed to start, Nicky said, “All right, Aaron, we should get moving.”

Aaron handed his drink off to Wymack and paused, looking at the group around him. “Uh... thanks for being here, guys.”

Abby smiled and squeezed his shoulder. “We wouldn’t miss this.”

“Go get married, fucko,” Allison said, shooing him away with a wave of her hand.

Aaron flipped her off and left with Nicky. Wymack ushered the rest of the group out to the pavilion to find their seats.

Neil felt awkward in the front row between Andrew and Erik. He clasped his hands tightly in his lap to keep from fidgeting. Aaron looked nervous as he stood in front of the arch with a man that Neil assumed was Pastor Jeffords.

Soft music played as the five-year-old daughter of Katelyn’s cousin walked down the aisle and dropped handfuls of purple flower petals. Behind Neil, Matt whispered, “Oh my god, that kid is so cute. Look at her tiny little shoes.”

Dan shushed him just as Allison hissed, “Get your baby fever under control, Boyd. Jesus.”
After the flower girl came Robin with Katelyn’s brother. Nicky followed with Katelyn’s maid of honor Jess and he winked at Erik as they went by.

The music changed and everyone stood up to watch Katelyn slowly walk down the aisle, holding onto her father’s arm. Her dress was a simple thing overlaid with lace and she carried a bouquet of sunflowers and small white daisies. She didn’t look at any of the guests as she passed by; she only had eyes for Aaron and, for the first time that day, Aaron had a genuine smile on his face.

The ceremony itself didn’t last long. Pastor Jeffords gave a short speech about love and commitment before reading a passage out of the Bible, which Neil didn’t pay attention to. Erik recorded a video of Aaron and Katelyn saying their vows on his phone.

After they were pronounced husband and wife, Aaron and Katelyn shared a chaste kiss and the music started up again. Aaron’s face turned red and Katelyn laughed brightly as everyone else clapped for them. Arm-in-arm, they headed up the aisle together, followed by the members of their wedding party.

Andrew silently watched his brother and his new sister-in-law walk away.

The guests went back to the main hall to mingle and dance and drink. Katelyn and Aaron went outside to get their photos done while the light was still decent. The band played upbeat music and the waitstaff slowly made their rounds with trays of appetizers. Neil followed Andrew to a table with bowls of rum punch, pitchers of peach sweet tea spiked with bourbon, and platters of fresh fruit. They got glasses of iced tea and slipped outside to stand on the wrap-around porch. From there, they could see Aaron and Katelyn with their photographer down in the garden by the riverbank.

Neil draped his jacket over the railing and loosened his tie with a sigh of relief. He wanted to know what Andrew thought about the wedding, but he felt it might be better to let Betsy bring that up. The twins’ relationship would always be scarred and watching Aaron make a promise to someone—a promise he was very likely to keep—probably jabbed at an old wound. Betsy would know what to say when Andrew was ready to hear it.

“What are you guys gonna do with the house?” Neil asked.

Andrew slid a look his way. “I told Nicky I’d pay off the rest of the mortgage.”

“You’re keeping it?”

“You and Robin need a place to crash if you go to Eden’s.”

Andrew knew Neil and Robin wouldn’t go to Eden’s by themselves. Keeping the house wouldn’t benefit them much; it would, however, give the cousins a chance to come back to the home the three of them had shared.

“Nicky and Aaron might want to visit,” Neil said lightly.

“What they do makes no difference to me,” Andrew muttered.

Neil smiled down at his drink and decided to let Andrew’s lie slide. The knot of worry in his chest loosened. The cousins would go their separate ways, but maybe they’d manage to hang onto each other anyway.
Neil didn’t know who decided to let Palmetto State host the southeastern district’s winter banquet, but he hoped they ran into some bad luck for the giant headache they caused him. By the end of the night, most of the Foxes were completely hammered, two of them were bruised from unrelated fights, Colby had somehow lost his pants and tie in a game of poker someone started in the men’s bathroom, and Lizzy’s purse was full of dinner rolls she swiped from the plates of unsuspecting coaches.

Wymack put a hand on Neil’s sagging shoulder and heaved a long-suffering sigh as they watched the visiting teams file out to their team buses. “Well, no one called the cops and we probably won’t get sued for anything, so let’s call it a win.”

Neil rubbed his face and groaned.

“Get these fuckers back to the Tower and then your babysitting duties are over.”

“Yes, Coach,” he grumbled. He did a quick check to make sure all the designated drivers for the evening were still sober before telling everyone to head out.

One way or another, they all ended up at the Tower, on the right floor if not in the right rooms, and Neil finally got to change out of his suit. He shuffled into his bedroom, mumbled a good-night to Robin, and collapsed on his bunk. Thankfully, sleep came easily.

A few hours later, he was woken up by his phone vibrating under his pillow. Neil stifled a curse as he pulled it out to see who was calling. Wincing at the bright light of the screen, he saw Dan’s name on the display. He flung back the covers and stumbled out into the main room, accepting the call as he went.

He lifted the phone to his ear and said, “Hey, Dan.”

“Hi.”
The deadened tone of her voice had him instantly alert and on edge.

“I bought you a plane ticket. Can you come up for a bit?”

“Yeah, sure, of course.” Neil swallowed the lump of fear in his throat. “When’s the flight?”

“Nine. I’ll pick you up when you get here. See you soon.”

The line cut off.

Neil looked at the time. He had two hours before his flight boarded. His chest was a block of ice.

The first thing he needed to do was call Andrew, who was currently in a hotel in Seattle sleeping off a rough game that the Buzzards took by a single point. Neil was supposed to meet him back in Atlanta later that day. A stab of guilt hit him in the gut as he hit the speed dial.

Andrew answered on the third ring, his voice rough and rumbling. “What’s going on, Neil?”

“Dan just called. She needs me in Philly.”

“Why?”

“She didn’t say, but she sounded really off. I’ve got a flight at nine.” Neil shook out his hand in an attempt to stop its trembling.

“You should pack.”

“Right. Yeah. I’ll-” Neil turned toward the bedroom and stopped abruptly. “I’ll let you know when I’ll be in Atlanta.”

Andrew yawned. “Okay.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

“Text me when you land.”

After the call disconnected, Neil chewed his lip and looked around the dark suite with nervous energy thrumming in his heart. Something was wrong. He had no idea what he was about to walk into.

Robin woke up while he was groping through his dresser drawer for clothing. Brian and Colby usually slept through anything, so she didn’t bother keeping her voice down when she asked, “What are you doing?”

“I have to go to Philly.” Neil shoved a handful of underwear into his bag. “I’ll get Wymack to drive me to the airport so you can use my car if you need it.”

Robin pushed back her blankets and climbed down from her bunk while Neil rifled through his drawer in search of clean shirts. “What’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“I’ll find out when I get there, I guess.”

He hadn’t needed to frantically pack his bag and run to an airport on short notice in a long time. He was rusty and panicking.

“When do you need to be at the airport?”
“Flight’s at nine, so in an hour.” Neil frowned down at his drawer in dismay. He owned too many things. He grabbed a clean pair of jeans and a two pairs of sweats.

Robin yawned into her fist. “I’ll go make some coffee.”

The sound of the door clicking shut woke Colby. He sat up in his bed with a groan and croaked, “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Neil told him. He could feel Colby’s eyes on him as he zipped up his duffel and left the room.

His thoughts were scattered while he went through the motions of showering and getting dressed. Thankfully, Robin seemed to understand; she didn’t bother trying to make conversation while Neil drank his coffee and ate a couple slices of toast. There was no point in worrying until he actually knew what was going on, but his mind still flicked through all the horrifying possibilities anyway.

At seven forty-five, he put his coat over his arm and slung his bag over his shoulder. Robin appeared next to him and said something he didn’t catch.

“Huh?”

“I’ll drive you to the airport. No need to wake Wymack up.”

“Oh.” Neil felt stupid for not thinking of that. “Right. Thanks.”

Robin dropped him off at Upstate Regional with a simple good-bye and plenty of time to spare. He checked in, got his boarding pass, and went through security so he could pace in the waiting area of the gate. The announcement about not smoking in the terminals and reporting suspicious activity to airport security played over the speakers at regular intervals. Dan’s hollow see you soon echoed in his head.

Old memories bubbled up to the surface: his mother’s claw-like grip on his sleeve as her eyes scanned the lines at the ticket counter, desperately trying not to seem nervous in front of the security guards, waiting with bated breath for the plane to take them away far away from the danger at their heels.

It’s not the same, Neil reminded himself. He repeated it over and over until he started to believe it.

Once he was seated on the plane, he stared at the carpet of the aisle and gnawed the inside of his cheek. Recycled air blew through the vents overhead. Other passengers stuffed their bags into the overhead compartments. Bright-eyed flight attendants with crisp uniforms made their way up and down the aisle. Gradually, everyone settled in their seats and the flight attendants ran through the usual safety spiel. Emergency exits, oxygen masks, life jackets under the seats.

It took two hours to get to Philadelphia. Every minute felt like an hour.

When they were finally on the ground again, waiting for the door to open, Neil fired off a quick text to Andrew to let him know that he made it in one piece. Then, he grabbed his bag and shoved his way into the line forming in the aisle.

On the jet bridge, Neil elbowed past the slower-moving people and quickened his pace until he was nearly jogging. Once he was past the gate, he called Dan. She picked up on the fourth ring.

“You here?”
“Yeah,” he said. “Where are you?”

“I’m almost there. I’ll get you out front.”

“Okay. I’ll see you in a few.”

Dan hung up without saying anything else. Neil swallowed hard and pocketed his phone.

The arrivals lane cut through the bowels of the parking garage, offering people shelter as they crowded together on the sidewalk with their suitcases. The air smelled like car fumes and damp concrete. Neil wandered along the sidewalk to search the line of cars for Dan’s dark orange jeep. The weather was overcast and drizzling. A breeze picked up and pushed against his face, slipping cold air down his collar. He slipped into his coat and craned his neck to get a better view.

His stomach lurched when Dan’s jeep caught his eye. Dan didn’t bother squeezing into a space by the curb; she just stopped in the next lane over. Neil darted between two parked cars and climbed into the passenger seat while the car behind them honked angrily.

“Hey,” he greeted quietly.

Dan hummed a little in acknowledgement as she continued driving. Her curls were squashed on one side and her eyes were empty. Matt’s Rolling Stones t-shirt hung loosely off her frame. Neil reached forward to turn the heat up, noting that Dan’s coat was nowhere to be seen.

Raindrops splattered on the windshield and turned into shivery rivulets as the jeep accelerated up the on-ramp onto 95 South. The wide, gray highway was dotted with the blurry shapes of cars.

“How’d finals go?” Dan asked, so softly Neil almost missed it.

“I think I did okay.”

“That’s good.” She switched the radio on before Neil could ask what this was all about.

Eventually, they ended up in a residential area. The rain was coming down harder. Christmas music played over the steady thump-thump of the windshield wipers. Neil made a mental list of street names and anything else-odd lawn ornaments, novelty mailboxes-that might help him remember the way back to the interstate. It never hurt to play it safe.

The jeep rolled to a stop at a red light and Dan’s hands went slack around the wheel. The cheerful Christmas music playing on the radio was at odds with the grim atmosphere.

Dan said, “I was pregnant.”

Neil froze. The windshield wipers smeared fat splashes of water across the glass.

“I found out a few weeks ago,” she went on. Her voice was too calm, too quiet. “We didn’t plan it or anything. Just happened, you know? And we were gonna tell everyone on Christmas Eve, during that group video call Renee wanted to do, but...”

Neil didn’t know what to say.

“We went in for our twelve-week scan and there was no heartbeat.” Dan paused and inhaled deeply, steeling herself. “Dr. Sanchez said it died at ten weeks.”

The light was green. Dan took her foot off the brake and gently pressed on the gas to take them through the intersection.
“Are you okay?” Neil asked.

Dan lifted a shoulder and wouldn’t look at him. “I had to go in yesterday to… for the operation. It’s not- I don’t feel so good right now, but it’ll be fine. I’ll be fine.”

Neil looked out his window at the muddy yards and bare trees in front of the houses they passed. He felt like someone was sitting on his chest. After a couple more turns, Dan pulled into a driveway outside a stone house with green shutters. All the windows were dark.

“Look,” Dan started shakily, “Matt’s a wreck right now and I can’t hold the both of us up, so I need you to just… just be here, okay?”

“Dan…”

“You’re his best friend, Neil. Please, just be here.”

The crack in her voice kept him quiet.

“You can tell Andrew if you want,” she added in a near-whisper. “He won’t give a shit, so it doesn’t matter.”

Neil opened his mouth to protest just because of how harsh it sounded, but Dan held her hand up to cut him off.

“I don’t care that he doesn’t care, Neil.” She sniffed and wiped the back of her wrist under her nose. “I’m going to a hotel for a little while.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“My baby is dead and there’s a fucking Christmas tree in my living room,” she spat. “I can’t be here right now.”

“You should call someone.”

Dan scrubbed a hand over her face. “When I’m ready.”

Neil felt completely helpless, but he knew he had to do something. Fumbling for the door handle, he said, “Okay. I’ll stay with Matt. You… you go do what you need to do.”

“Thanks. There’s a spare key under the flower pot.”

Neil got out of the jeep with his bag. He was cold all the way down to his bones as he followed the footpath up to the porch. He located the spare key and, when he glanced over his shoulder, the jeep was gone.

The house was silent and dim. Neil left his sneakers on the shoe rack by the door and dropped his bag on the couch in the living room by the unlit Christmas tree. Then, he went in search of Matt. He’d never been to the Boyd-Wilds house before, but it still felt familiar in a way. Bags of Exy gear were slumped against the wall in the main hallway. Dirty PSU mugs sat next to the kitchen sink. Framed photos of the Foxes and Matt’s mother and Dan’s stage sisters were everywhere.

Upstairs, Neil peeked through the first open door he saw. The master bedroom was empty and so was the en-suite bathroom.

A sound came from down the hall and Neil went to investigate. The door was closed, but unlocked. There was no furniture in the room, only a large box with a picture of a crib on it sitting in the
middle of the floor. One wall had patches of paint in a row done in different shades of yellow.

Matt was curled up in the corner with a beer in his hand and two empty bottles beside him. Dark stubble covered his jaw and his hair looked flat and greasy. He smelled like alcohol and body odor.

His bloodshot eyes lifted to Neil’s face and squinted in confusion. “Neil? What’re you doing here?”

Neil crouched by Matt’s feet. “Dan called me. I’m gonna stay here for a little while.”

“Where’s Dan?”

“She went to a hotel. Did she not tell you?”

“We-” Matt sucked in a sharp, stuttering breath- “had a fight. God, I’m such a fucking asshole. Is she gonna come back?”

“I’m sure she will.” The Dan and Matt he knew were unbreakable, but he felt like he was dealing with strangers. Everything was wrong.

“Our baby died,” Matt croaked miserably.

Neil whispered, “I’m sorry.”

“What am I gonna do, Neil? What if Dan hates me now? What if I can’t fix it?”

A chill scraped down Neil’s spine. Matt was staring at him like he was supposed to have all the answers. Part of Neil still questioned if he was sturdy enough for anyone to lean on.

He sat down and slipped his arm around Matt’s shoulders. Matt usually hugged him when he was in a rough place- as if he was literally trying to hold Neil together- so Neil figured it was worth a shot. It started off awkward, but then Matt relaxed and rested his head against Neil’s. Small tremors wracked his frame as he swallowed a sob.

Eventually, Neil asked, “What was the fight about?”

Matt blew out a harsh breath. “The doctor asked us if we wanted to keep the remains for a burial or cremation or something.”

Neil stared at the picture of the crib on the box.

“I thought it’d give us some closure,” Matt said, “you know, burying our baby and saying goodbye, but Dan didn’t want to. She just said, ‘Get rid of it,’ and I’ve never heard her sound so cold.”

“So you argued about it.”

Matt’s shoulder shifted against him, attempting to shrug. “I got upset and tried to change her mind, but she shut me out. When we got home, I said things- I don’t remember most of it, but I do remember asking her why she didn’t care more.”

Neil pressed his lips together tightly.

“You don’t have to say I’m an asshole. I know I’m an asshole.” A sharp, pained noise rose in Matt’s throat. He pressed his forehead to his knee and shivered. “She wouldn’t even let me come with her to the hospital. Just got in a cab while I was in the shower. She just wanted it all to be over. I should’ve been there for her. Fuck.”
Helplessly, Neil watched Matt clutch at his hair and take deep, controlled breaths. “Should I call your manager?” he asked.

“I got myself scratched from tomorrow’s game,” Matt said, sniffling. “They said it was okay for me to miss a couple days of practice.”

That was a relief. “When was the last time you ate something?”

“I’m not hungry.”

“That wasn’t what I asked.”

Matt blew out a harsh breath. “Yesterday. I had a late dinner.”

“Okay. What do you feel like eating?”

“Beer.”

Neil shook his head and stood up. “Go shower. I’ll be in the kitchen.”

“I don’t want to move,” Matt groaned. He grimaced before he slowly got to his feet, leaning heavily on the wall for support.

Once Neil was sure that Matt wouldn’t topple over on his way to the bathroom, he ventured back downstairs to the kitchen to see if he could scrape a meal together. Thankfully, the cupboards and fridge looked like someone had gone to the store recently and, even better, there was a plate of leftover pasta wrapped in foil. It didn’t have a weird smell or any mold growing on it, so Neil assumed it was still fine to eat. While he warmed it up on the stove, he called Andrew.

“Well?” Andrew answered. He sounded bored, but Neil knew if he didn’t want to hear about this, he would’ve ignored the call.

“Dan had a miscarriage,” he said quietly. “She wanted me to look after Matt.”

Andrew hmm-ed.

“I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to help them.”

“You can’t make their kid less dead.”

Neil rested his hip against the counter and made a face. “If you were in my shoes, how would you handle this?”

“They’re your friends, not mine.”

“I know, but if it was Aaron—”

“Just keep them out of trouble ‘til they get their heads on straight. I have to go. Team’s heading out to the airport soon.”


“Yeah. I’ll text you when I land.”

Andrew hung up first. Neil put his phone away and turned back to the stove to stir the pasta. His stomach felt hollow with sympathetic grief, but he knew Andrew was right. As usual, he cut right
to the heart of Neil’s problem before Neil could bring himself to. It wasn’t a problem that could be fixed, only endured. Neil squared his shoulders. He could do that; he could stand guard while they pieced themselves back together. After all, they’d done the same for him countless times.

“Hey,” Matt mumbled as he came shuffling into the kitchen a few minutes later. He was wearing clean clothes, but he hadn’t bothered to shave. His hair dripped water onto his shoulders.


“M not hungry.”

“I’ve heard eating is kind of a good thing to do, especially for pro athletes.”

Matt’s silence was heavy and disturbing. Any other day he would’ve cracked a joke, quoted Kevin’s infamous lecture on carbs, or retorted that Neil was finally caught up on normal human habits.

Neil filled a glass with water and pushed it into Matt’s hands. Andrew would’ve focused on basic needs—food, water, shelter—and let the rest sort itself out. It didn’t sound like a bad strategy.

He didn’t say anything else to Matt as he dished him up a plate of pasta. Matt blinked down at it for a second before he remembered what he was supposed to do with it. While he sat down at the breakfast bar to eat, Neil busied himself with washing the dirty dishes in the sink.

It wasn’t until a few hours later, when they were sitting on the couch in the living room with the Christmas tree, that Matt said, “I bought the crib too early.”

Neil turned toward him to show he was listening.

“Dan said to wait until after the first trimester, but… I don’t know. I was excited.” Matt heaved a long sigh. “Part of me knows that this isn’t the right time for us to start having kids. Before we got married, we agreed that I’d retire before we started trying.”

“When were you thinking of retiring?” Neil asked slowly. Matt was in good shape and he was playing better than ever. If things kept going well for him, he could last until he was thirty-four or thirty-five.

“I was actually thinking about calling it quits after this contract runs out.”

Neil stared at him in shock. “You’ve only got a year left on this contract. You’d really give up Exy so soon?”

Matt’s laugh sounded rusty. “Yeah, man. I’d love all that stay-at-home dad shit.”

“But…”

“Look, I don’t want my kids to think me being home is a special occasion and I really don’t want Dan to have to juggle everything. She works her ass off.”

“I know she does,” Neil said. “I bet she’s a really good coach.”

“Damn straight,” Matt mumbled, relaxing back into the cushions. He stared pensively at the Christmas tree for a few minutes before asking, “Have you heard from her?”

Neil shook his head. “She’s probably sleeping. She looked tired.”
“Yeah.”

“You could try calling. Leave a message if she doesn’t pick up.”

“She usually needs time to process stuff on her own when we fight.” Matt sniffed and rubbed his eye with the heel of his hand. “I don’t want to rush her through it.”

“Okay,” Neil said.

Matt smiled sadly. “By the way, we were gonna ask you to be the godfather.”

“That supposed to be a mob joke or something?” Neil asked. He meant it to be teasing, but it sounded wrong to his ears.

Thankfully, Matt was amused. “You love that movie, admit it.”

“It’s not the worst thing you’ve made me sit through.”

Matt’s laugh sounded close to the real thing—almost, not quite. He still needed time.

Neil nodded toward the Christmas tree and asked, “Should we take that down? Dan mentioned something about not wanting to see it.”

Matt pulled himself to his feet and ambled across the room to plug in the string of multicolored lights that twisted around the tree’s branches. Red, blue, and green light flashed over Matt’s face. He scrunched up his nose in annoyance.

“Young, I see what she meant now,” he muttered as he reached down to unplug the lights. “We can put it in the dining room. We never go in there anyway.”

They picked the ornaments off the tree and put them in a box Matt got from the hall closet. Neil tucked the cord for the lights into the prickly branches and Matt got the star off the top. They left a trail of pine needles and tinsel in their wake when they moved the tree. Eventually they got it situated at the head of the dusty dining table with the box of ornaments next to it.

Neil’s phone vibrated with a message from Andrew, which simply read: Landed. Longing kicked at Neil’s heart, but he didn’t let himself focus on it for too long. He texted back a quick “drive safe” and got back to work.

While Neil swept up the needles and tinsel, Matt went to the mantel and carefully took down the Christmas cards they’d taped up there. Those went in the dining room along with the wreath from the front door and some more decorations Matt gathered from around the house.

For dinner, they decided to get take-out. Neil didn’t comment on the fact that Matt ordered Dan’s favorite kind of curry, which went straight into the fridge. They took their plates and drinks to the couch and watched an action movie Matt had rented earlier that week.

It was dark outside by the time the movie ended. They both jumped when Neil’s phone went off and the hopeful look on Matt’s face made Neil feel guilty. “Sorry, it’s just Kevin,” he said as he got up. He didn’t answer the call until he was in the kitchen, out of earshot.

“What’s going on in Philly?” Kevin asked.

“How do you know I’m in Philly?”

“The Sirens had a layover in Atlanta and our flight got delayed, so we went to Andrew’s place. He
“I’m just visiting.”

“You used to be better at lying.”

“Kevin.”

“Is someone dying?”

“Not at the moment.” Neil winced.

“Good. Thea says hello, by the way.”

“Uh-huh and what else?”

“She wanted me to ask if you remember what your defensive line is supposed to be doing. She has a point, you know. That last game was a joke.”

Neil rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well, she practically gift-wrapped those two points for Paulson on Monday, so I don’t want to hear shit from her.”

“Thea was sticking to the strategy, something your defense should try next time.”

“We still won.”

“Only because the other team was JD Campbell. I gotta go. We have to head back to the airport and Andrew’s threatening to make us take a cab if I don’t hang up now.”

“Bye, Kevin.”

“Don’t get into trouble,” Kevin said before hanging up.

Neil muttered unhappily under his breath while he got two glasses of water and carried them out to the living room. Matt’s phone was sitting on the carpet next to the couch and Matt was slumped over the armrest, staring down at it.

“Do you want to watch something else?” Neil asked.

Matt grunted, but it wasn’t clear if it meant yes or no.

Neil set the glasses down on the coffee table and looked at the DVD cases scattered in front of the TV stand. “We could, um, watch Die Hard. You still love that one, right?”

“Doctor said she might have cramps after the operation,” Matt said. The words came out slurred because of the way his face was pressed to the armrest. “She left the heating pad here. What if she needs it?”

“She’ll be okay, Matt.” Neil sent off a quick text message to Dan anyway: You ok?

Matt pressed his forehead to his knees and clutched at his hair. “I feel sick.”

“You need a bucket?”

“No.” Matt sat up and exhaled slowly. “I don’t know.”

“Do you want to try getting some sleep?”
“Couldn’t hurt, I guess.” Matt looked around the room and gestured weakly toward the front door. “Can you make sure everything’s locked up?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about it.”

Matt nodded, took a few slow steps toward the stairs, and stopped with a frown on his face. “Um, there’s a guest room down here, past the dining room. Extra blankets and pillows are in the hall closet. You can take a shower, too, if you want. There’s some towels—”

“I’ll figure it out,” Neil assured him quietly. “Get some rest. I’ll see you in the morning.”


Neil checked his phone as Matt went upstairs. Dan hadn’t replied yet and that bothered him more than it usually would have even though he knew she was probably resting or calling someone who was better at handling emotional problems than he was.

He took a quick shower in the upstairs bathroom before seeking out the guest bedroom Matt had mentioned. It was instantly obvious that Allison made the most use out of the room. It was all done in white and cool shades of blue-gray. The furniture looked vintage and there were bottles of perfume and lotion on the vanity table along with a framed sketch of a French bulldog. On the bed there were more pillows than any human could possibly need. Neil shoved most of them aside and climbed under the covers before turning off the lamp on the nightstand.

In spite of his exhaustion and how luxurious the bed was, Neil couldn’t get comfortable with the anxious knots in his stomach. Dan still hadn’t texted him back. Matt was somewhere upstairs, no doubt stewing in his own misery.

Neil’s thoughts slowed down enough for him to really think about what his friends had lost. He’d known for a while that they wanted to have children, but it was a half-formed, faraway possibility. It was hard to picture Matt and Dan being parents. Neil wondered if that was because he still wasn’t sure what normal parents were actually like. There would be no bodies in their cellar, no guns cleaned at the dinner table, no stern warnings about what not to do when the detectives came around asking questions.

Rolling onto his stomach, Neil adjusted his pillow and huffed quietly. Matt and Dan’s child would be allowed to play with other kids at the playground and go to a school like the ones Neil used to see on TV and make noise without any fear of their dad’s temper.

He wondered what this child would’ve been like if things had worked out differently. He wondered if they would’ve inherited Dan’s sense of humor or Matt’s confidence.

He wondered how long Dan lay there at the doctor’s office, waiting to hear a heartbeat, before reality set in.

Thinking of that made his throat close up and heat prick the corners of his eyes, so he distracted himself by thinking of Exy and the Foxes and Andrew waiting for him in Atlanta until he finally drifted off into a light sleep.

He jolted awake later, alert and on edge without really understanding why. It was still dark outside. The house was quiet.

Then he heard someone kicking off their shoes near the front door. Neil pushed the covers off his body and hurried down the hallway. He switched on the living room light and it spilled out into the entryway, where Dan was frozen in place at the foot of the stairs.
“Sorry if I woke you up,” she murmured with a weak smile. “I couldn’t sleep at the hotel.”

Neil studied her warily. “Do you want the guest room? I’ll take the couch.”

Dan chewed her lip and glanced up the stairs. “Did he talk to you?”

“He told me about the fight and what he said to you.”

She grimaced and hugged her middle. “We both said shit we shouldn’t have.”

Neil decided to take her word for it. “What do you want to do now?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I-” she peered into the living room and went quiet. “Where’s the tree?”

“We put all the Christmas stuff in the dining room. It sounded like you didn’t want to see it.”

Dan stared at the dark space where the tree had been and seemed to make up her mind about something. “I’m going to go upstairs. I’ll see you in the morning, okay? We can try out the new waffle maker.”

“Okay,” Neil said slowly. “Sleep well.”

She gave him a quick, hard hug and then she went upstairs, looking more like herself.

Neil didn’t really understand what had just happened and he didn’t know what to expect in the morning, but the knots in his stomach loosened a little. He felt like Matt and Dan were going to be okay, one way or another.
Chapter Summary

Neil says goodbye.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Neil zipped his duffel bag shut and swept his eyes over the empty bedroom. He almost wished there was more to pack, but the rest of his belongings had already migrated from the Tower to Abby’s house. He and Andrew had been sharing the guest bedroom there ever since the Buzzards got knocked out of the playoffs and their season got cut short.

“Do you have everything?” Andrew asked from the doorway.

Neil shrugged a shoulder and replied, “I think so.”

He already played his last game as a Fox, went to his last practice at the Foxhole Court, and finished his last exam for his last class. All that was left was the commencement ceremony tomorrow morning. Dan and Nicky talked him into going even though he still wasn’t sure he wanted to sit through the whole thing just to walk across a stage. After it was over, he and Andrew would pack up their cars and drive north.

There was an apartment in St. Louis with Neil’s name on the lease and there was a copy of his new contract with the Starlings tucked into his messenger bag. His new life was ready and waiting for him just a few states away.

“Are you having a nervous breakdown?”

It was the third time Andrew had asked that this week.

“No, I’m not,” Neil said as he grabbed his bag. “I was just… looking. Let’s go.”

Andrew picked up the last cardboard box and headed down the hallway. When his back was turned, Neil lightly touched his old bed frame and let out a shallow breath. As nice as it would be to have his own place with all the privacy he could ever want, he was already homesick for Fox Tower.

“Neil,” Andrew called from the main room.

Neil slung the strap of the duffel bag over his shoulder and hurried out of the bedroom.

The journey downstairs was unnervingly quiet since everyone else had cleared out of the Tower already. Except for Robin, all the younger Foxes went home for the summer after the surprise farewell party Lizzy and Brook planned for Neil. Thankfully, Wymack respected Neil’s wishes and didn’t threaten anyone into sticking around to watch Neil get his diploma.

The late afternoon sun turned Andrew’s hair glinting and golden as they walked to the Maserati. They put Neil’s duffel bag and the box in the trunk and climbed into their seats. Andrew rolled
down all the windows and shifted into drive. Neil watched the Tower in his side mirror until it disappeared from view.

Robin had spent the last month pointing out everything that was less than ideal about living in the Tower: the temperature in the suite was never quite right, the washing machines were all the way down in the basement, there was always someone making too much noise.

In that moment, though, all Neil could remember was how it felt to have his own bed after a year of sleeping on floors, nights on the roof with Andrew, all the Foxes crowded into one room with their blankets and pillows and pajamas after they brought Neil home from Baltimore.

When he sighed heavily, Andrew glanced at him but said nothing. It didn’t escape Neil’s notice that Andrew was following the speed limit for once, which bought them a little more time before they got to Abby’s house.

Neil was surprised to see Matt’s truck and Nicky’s rental car parked on the street on either side of the driveway. Matt and Dan weren’t sure they’d make it in time for dinner and Nicky claimed he and Erik had other plans that night down in Columbia, where they’d been staying for two weeks. Neil’s graduation gave them an excuse for a vacation and Nicky was determined to make the most of it.

“I didn’t expect Nicky and Erik to be here tonight,” Neil said as Andrew parked next to the Jaguar in the driveway.

Andrew replied, “Nicky would never turn down free food.”

The breeze carried smoke from the grill in Abby’s backyard out to them as they walked up the front path. The door was left unlocked and all the lights in the house were off, but Neil could hear familiar voices through the open windows.

Andrew dropped the box in the front room with some other boxes of Neil’s and Neil left his duffel bag at the foot of the bed in the guest room. Someone was in the bathroom, so Neil washed his hands in the kitchen sink before he and Andrew stepped outside.

Dan was the first to spot them and she jumped up from her seat at the table to wrap Neil in a tight embrace. Matt abandoned Wymack and Erik at the grill to jog over and throw his arms around Dan and Neil at once until Allison smacked Matt’s shoulder and demanded a turn hugging Neil.

Nicky drained the rest of his martini and got up to hug Neil next, dramatically crying, “Oh, Neil, it’s been so long!” even though they’d seen each other the day before. Robin stayed behind at the table and grinned at Nicky’s antics.

Erik came up beside his fiance and gave Neil a friendly clap on the shoulder.

“Did you get all your things from the Tower?” Abby asked as she arranged plates of food on the table.

“You’re not gonna fit all that shit into your car,” Wymack called from the grill he was manning. “Get a U-Haul ‘cause Abby’s not babysitting your boxes.”

“He’ll be fine,” said Matt.

“Coach, you can help him drive stuff up to St. Louis,” Allison suggested. “It’s not like you’re doing anything anyway.”
“Yeah, Coach, get off your ass and do something,” said Nicky. He laughed and ducked behind Erik when Wymack glowered at him.

Dan rolled her eyes and turned back to Neil. “How does it feel to be done with school? I felt about twenty pounds lighter after my last final.”

“You finally dropped your freshman fifteen,” Allison quipped.

Dan smacked her arm.

The sound of bare feet hitting the kitchen floor and Renee’s voice calling, “Oh, you’re here!” made Neil and Andrew turn. Neil still wasn’t used to the sight of Renee with her naturally dark hair, now grown well past her shoulders. She hopped off the concrete step onto the patio and wrapped Neil in a gentle hug.

“Thanks for being here,” Neil said as they pulled apart. “I didn’t expect to see all of you tonight.”

Renee flashed him a bright smile. “We all wanted to be here to see you off. It’s good to see you both again.” She gently touched Andrew’s shoulder, which he returned with a brief touch to her elbow, while Dan and Allison began peppering Neil with questions about his move to St. Louis.

Suddenly, it seemed like everyone was talking at once: Nicky started planning an extended road trip so he could visit everyone in their respective cities, Erik asked Matt how long it would take to drive to Neil’s new apartment, Allison and Dan argued that Nicky wouldn’t have to drive all over the country if they could all organize a proper reunion somewhere, Robin sidled up to Renee and Andrew to hear about Renee’s latest trip to Asia.

Finally Wymack put two fingers in his mouth and gave a sharp, shrill whistle to silence everyone. “All right, shut up and sit down. Food’s ready.”

“And tip your waitresses,” Nicky added, bumping his hip against Erik’s as they walked to their seats.

“I think they’ve gotten louder,” Andrew muttered.

Neil shot him an amused, half-smile and grabbed a seat next to Matt. Wymack put a serving plate of grilled burgers and hot dogs in the middle of the table and took his seat at the head of the table. Andrew disappeared into the kitchen for a minute and came back out with two glasses of whiskey. He sat between Neil and Robin and handed Neil one of the glasses, which Neil accepted gratefully. Seeing most of his old team together like this made him happy, of course, but there was something hard and bittersweet in the pit of his stomach. He hoped the alcohol would soothe some of it away.

“Wait, is Kevin coming?” Dan asked as she put a hot dog into a bun. “Coach, your son better be here.”

“Oh, Christ,” Matt groaned. “He’s going to be insufferable about playoffs.”

“It’s not your fault the Bobcats sucked this year,” Nicky cooed and patted Matt’s hair.

“Your team did better than Andrew’s,” Allison pointed out.

Neil scoffed. “That’s because the Buzzards’ management is a shitshow and their best striker had to retire mid-season because of an injury.”

“Maybe Andrew would be better off on a team like the Starlings,” Dan said teasingly. “Is that what
“The Starlings are a solid team,” Wymack said. “Although they just signed a real smart-mouthed punk, so their reputation is doomed.”

Matt chuckled. “I hope the PR team’s been warned.”

“I’m not that bad,” Neil grumbled before taking a bite of his burger.

Andrew paused with a forkful of macaroni casserole halfway to his mouth just to arch an eyebrow at him. Neil scowled in return, which made Robin snicker.

“What was it you said about the Ravens back in January?” Nicky asked.

“When a reporter brought up the fact that he might have to face the Ravens again, he said, ‘Only if I look in the toilet,’” Robin recited from memory. “That was a fun week.”

Neil rolled his eyes as the others laughed. Lizzy and Brian had quoted that interview endlessly and someone taped copies of the Ravens’ team photo to the toilet lids in the Foxes’ bathrooms at the stadium.

Of course, some Ravens fans decided to egg the Tower, but that seemed tame compared to years past.

“I would say it’ll get easier now that Neil and his fat mouth are leaving, but Holly’s bound to be just as bad,” Wymack said with a long-suffering sigh.

Dan winced. “Yeah, we saw what happened when she and Neil did press together. Oof.”

“Speaking of assholes,” Robin said, “Nicky, I thought you said Aaron was gonna be here.”

Nicky nodded and swallowed his food before answering, “Yeah, he’ll show up unless he wants me to use his baby pictures for Christmas cards.”

Dan’s eyes lit up with glee. “What? What pictures? I will literally pay you for them.”

“You’ve had baby pictures this whole time and you never said anything?” Matt threw a piece of his dinner roll at Nicky’s head. “You and I are no longer friends, Hemmick.”

“Aw, Matthew,” whined Nicky. “Don’t be like-”

“Divorced,” Matt declared, thumping his fist on the table.

“Who’s getting divorced?” asked Kevin’s voice from inside the kitchen. A second later, he appeared in the open doorway, rumpled from travel and weary looking. Thea stepped outside after him and swept her eyes over the table.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Nicky said.

Abby stood up to give Kevin and Thea quick hugs and hello’s before going inside to find two more chairs. “You might want to grab four chairs,” Kevin called after her.

“Four?” Allison asked.

“That’s what I said.” Kevin shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it over his arm. “Apparently, Aaron and Katelyn are catching a flight out tonight. He tried to get me to give him a ride.”
Nicky’s forehead scrunched in bemusement. “And you said no?”

“I wasn’t going to wait around at Upstate Regional just to be his chauffeur.”

“So much meaner in person,” Robin said quietly, shaking her head. Matt shot her a grin from across the table and mouthed, “I know.”

“Josten,” said Thea, folding her arms and leveling him with a hard stare. “I hope for your sake you don’t regret going to St. Louis.”

Neil shrugged. “I didn’t want to move to Houston. Heard there’s a giant asshole living there.”

Kevin looked annoyed at him; he’d been annoyed at Neil for months ever since Neil rejected the Sirens’ offer. Neil was in awe of what Kevin accomplished as an Exy player, but as a person he still got on Neil’s nerves more often than not.

“It might be interesting,” Kevin said finally. “You’ll give Thea a decent challenge.”

Robin speared some turnip greens and shoved them into her mouth. “I’m looking forward to the first Buzzards-Starlings game. I hope Neil and Andrew get to actually play against each other.”

That sparked a table-wide conversation about bets and which games people were already planning on going to. Neil ate his burger and listened quietly as the upcoming season started to take shape. Dan promised to make reservations so she and Matt could take Neil out to dinner when he played in Philly- even if Matt’s team lost. Allison had plans to fly to Houston for the Starlings’ first game against the Sirens.

By the time Aaron and Katelyn showed up, most of them were pleasantly tipsy and firmly set in the plans they’d just made.

“Aaron!” Nicky said as soon as his cousin sat down. “I’m gonna visit you and we’re gonna go to St. Louis this fall. Buzzards and Starlings. Get your foam finger or whatever they’re waving around these days.”

Aaron frowned in confusion. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Games,” was all Nicky was able to say before dissolving into drunken laughter, which set Matt off. Dan shook her head at her husband’s giggling before she started laughing too.

“Messy drunks, all of you,” Allison declared over the rim of her martini glass. “Coach, you did a shit job raising your kids.”

“Like anybody could tell any of you to do a damn thing,” Wymack groused. “Not a shred of decency in any of you- except Erik and Thea. Sorry you both got dragged down by these loons.”

“What about me?” Katelyn asked.

“You cheerleaders were always up to some sort of nonsense. Never trusted any of you.”

Nicky said, “Come on, Coach. Katelyn was the only one scheming to get in one of our pants. The rest of the Vixens were pure angels.”

Katelyn’s jaw dropped. “Hey! Nicky, I thought you were on my side.”

Nicky put his hands up. “Just telling it like it is. You stole my son’s virtue.”
“Erik, control your boyfriend. He’s hammered,” Aaron said.

“Don’t treat me like a stranger, Aaron,” complained Nicky.

“I’ve never met you in my life.”

“There is no love at this table,” Matt said, rubbing his face. “No love. Only booze.”

“There might be love at the hotel,” Dan told him with an exaggerated wink.

Allison looked at Renee and shook her head.

Kevin, who had opted to remain sober, leaned closer to Thea to say, “I warned you it would be like this.”

“They’re Foxes,” Thea replied. “I expected nothing less.”

Neil hid his grin by downing the rest of his whiskey. The alcohol softened the edge of his worry and his focus narrowed down to just that evening. Nothing beyond the glow of the lanterns Abby put around the table mattered. Neil had everything he needed.

The hours drifted by, the night air gradually cooled, and eventually the Foxes were either on the verge of falling asleep or sobering up. Erik helped Nicky into the rental car and sheepishly wished everyone a good night. Renee drove Matt, Dan, and Allison in Matt’s truck to the hotel they were all staying at. Kevin and Thea weren’t far behind. Robin yawned for what seemed like the millionth time in the last hour and stumbled inside to sleep on the couch.

Katelyn insisted on helping with clean-up even though she and Aaron ate dinner elsewhere, so Aaron was left alone with Neil and Andrew at the table. After a few awkward beats of silence, Neil went inside with the excuse of needing to use the bathroom. As he passed through the doorway, he heard Aaron ask, “So, have you seen Betsy lately?”

Neil joined Abby at the sink and peered through the window at the twins.

“Are they talking?” Katelyn asked lowly, sidling up to Abby’s other side.

“I can’t tell,” Abby replied. “When’s the last time they saw each other?”

“Aaron went to a game in Indianapolis back in November, but he didn’t say if they actually saw each other. I have no idea what’s going on with them.”

Still feeling a little lightheaded from the drinks he had, Neil navigated through the dark house with a hand on the wall to steady him until he made it to the bathroom. Then, he ambled down the hallway to the guest bedroom, where he flopped facedown on the bed.

The happy warmth in his chest dimmed as he lay there alone in the silence of the guest room. The pleasant buzz of alcohol faded too.

It’s over, he thought and a dull thump of misery hit him in the chest. The only reason he hadn’t gone pro already was because he wanted as much time at the Foxhole Court as he could get and now his time was up. It was over.

His career was only just beginning, but all Neil could see was the heartbreaking ending right in front of him. He felt like he was being marched toward a cliff’s edge with dark, deep water down below. The only options were sink or swim.
Neil clumsily got to his feet and rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. The room was too small and too still. He didn’t want to call Andrew away from his rare moment with Aaron, so he sent a quick text that said, Going out for some air.

He slipped out of the house and drove away in the Jaguar with no destination in mind. Not long later, he found himself pulling into the stadium parking lot.

For the last time, Neil let himself into the stadium and made the trek down the hallway to the lounge. The walls were covered with photos of Foxes, former and current. Most of the newer ones were taken by Colby and Neil was in the background of some, the unwitting subject of others. The photograph of Andrew and Neil at Upstate Regional was still there, of course. Half-buried, but not lost. It would always have a place at the Foxhole Court even though Neil no longer did.

Neil pulled himself away and went to find the switches for the stadium lights. Once he flipped them from off to on, electricity hummed and the emergency lights lit up, followed by blocks of white light illuminating the rows and rows of orange and white seats.

At the center of it all, the court was just as beautiful as it was when Neil first laid eyes on it. The floorboards were recently buffed and polished; the plexiglass walls were spotless. It hadn’t changed at all.

Neil let out a tight, slow breath and made his way down to the home bench to sit down. His heart sank into his stomach like a ball of lead. This was the last time he’d do this. Once he moved away it would be different: when he returned it would be as a visitor, a spectator, part of the crowd. Someone else would be captain, someone else would be wearing the number ten. Neil was leaving, but he felt like the one being left behind.

Wymack’s voice rang out from behind him, “For a man who used to live life on the run, you sure are easy to track down.”

Neil sniffed hard and cleared his throat to ensure his voice wouldn’t crack. “Did Andrew send you?”

“He might be filthy rich, but I’m not his messenger boy.”

“Maybe you should consider changing careers. The pay would be better.”

Wymack swatted the back of Neil’s head as he sat on the bench beside him. The eerie, dreamlike quality of the gleaming floorboards and the pristine plexiglass was broken now that Neil wasn’t alone. It was slightly easier to breathe.

“Tonight was nice,” Neil said.

“Thank Abby. She did most of the work.”

Neil nodded. “I’m surprised everyone made it.”

“I’m not. Those assholes always show up for free booze. Some things never change.”

“Some things do,” Neil said with a small, brittle smile. “It’s not all bad, though.”

“No, it’s not all bad, so why the moping?”

“I’m not moping.”
“I know when you’ve been moping. I’m your coach, remember?”

“Not anymore, you’re not.”

Wymack swatted the back of Neil’s head again. Neil glowered at the floor and hunched his shoulders.

“Look, when you first got here you were skittish as anything, afraid of your own shadow. Now, it’d take a hell of a lot to knock you over,” Wymack said. “You’ll be just fine when you leave here, but if for some reason you’re not, you’ve got plenty of family to fall back on.”

Neil swallowed the lump in his throat. “Are you saying I could crash on your couch again?”

“I know what kinda money Andrew’s making. You’ve got no business trying to take my couch,” Wymack said gruffly. He shot Neil an indecipherable look. “Speaking of, you two better wash your sheets before you take off tomorrow. What you do together is your business, but you’re grown-ass men and you can damn well clean up after yourselves.”

“Yes, Coach,” Neil said flatly.

“Good. And if you cry all over my floorboards, I expect you to mop it up.”

“Yes, Coach.”

Wymack nodded to himself, satisfied, and stood up. “It was good having you around, Josten,” he said. “Don’t be a stranger after you leave.”


He listened to Wymack walk away and waited for the last echoes of the foyer doors falling shut to fade. Then, he got to his feet. With a slow, deep breath, Neil swept one last look over the Foxhole Court before turning to leave. Quietly, he said his last goodbye. He took his time walking through the foyer and the locker room and the lounge, but he kept moving until he was finally outside.

When he got back to Abby’s, the window of the guest bedroom was glowing yellow with lamplight. He found Andrew sitting up in bed with an open book in his lap. Andrew didn’t look up as Neil padded to his side of the bed and slipped under the covers. For a heartbeat, everything else fell away: there was only Andrew and the warmth in Neil’s chest at having him so close by again.

Andrew turned the page and other things began creeping back into Neil’s mind. He moved down on the bed to lay flat on his back and stare up at the ceiling.

“I’m moving to St. Louis,” he mumbled.

Andrew set his book aside and turned his full attention on Neil. “Did you just now realize that? You already signed the lease for your apartment and everything. I’m almost impressed by the level of denial.”

“I haven’t been living in denial,” Neil said with an annoyed huff. “I accepted that I’m leaving a while ago. I just… I still don’t want to do it. The Foxhole Court made me who I am. How the hell am I supposed to move to St. Louis?”

“Stop talking about the court like it’s a sentient being. It’s basically just a box.”

“It’s more than that,” Neil argued.
“It’s an expensive box.”

Agitated, Neil sat back up and dragged his fingers through his hair. “You remember everything, Andrew. You remember that I was nothing when I came here. Exy was the only decent thing in my life and the Foxhole Court was what I stuck around for that first summer. Without that, I wouldn’t be here. I’d probably be rotting in the woods somewhere.”

Andrew wasn’t impressed by his speech. “You’re taking your emotional baggage with you. Same shit, different state. The court you play on doesn’t matter.”

Neil deflated, hanging his head. “I still don’t want to move.”

“Of course you don’t. It’s Missouri.”

“It was closer to Atlanta than Seattle or Los Angeles,” Neil reminded him. “And I really didn’t want to be alone on a team with Kevin— ugh, Kevin and Thea. They’re even worse together.”

Andrew looked over Neil’s face for a few quiet moments, like he was searching for something. “I’ll only be in Atlanta for one more season.”

Neil nodded with a sinking feeling in his gut. At the moment, he didn’t have it in him to hope that Andrew would sign with the Starlings. “Good point. We could end up on opposite ends of the country anyway.”

“It won’t be forever.”

The air suddenly felt closer, warmer.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Neil murmured, and it felt like a promise. They’d be together again someday.

He hooked two fingers in the collar of Andrew’s loose t-shirt and pulled him into a kiss. Andrew went willingly, shifting both of them to lay down without breaking apart. Andrew’s hand slipped over Neil’s hip and under his shirt to slide up his ribs.

Neil relaxed under Andrew’s touch and let himself sink into the vast wanting he’d tried to ignore, all the blinding hope he’d shied away from. He wanted years of playing Exy, of blinding success, but he also wanted to hang onto the people who mattered most to him. He wanted to see Matt and Dan’s future children grow up. He wanted to see Nicky’s new home in Germany and he wanted to spend more time with Allison. He wanted to come back someday to see the Foxhole Court again.

Somehow he’d figure out a way to have it all. Five years ago, Neil came to Palmetto with nothing and now he had the whole world at his fingertips.

Chapter End Notes

First off, I’d like to say thank you to my wonderful and fearless friend/beta reader/sounding board snappleeducated for all the help and support she gave me over the course of this fic (I adore you, darlin’).

Second, some of you may remember me saying that I planned to keep this fic going until Neil and Andrew’s retirement, but plans have changed. My aforementioned beta reader suggested I end Cartographer here because of how this chapter played out and
after a bit of thinking I decided it was for the best. I may come back to Lessons in the future, but for now I’m not making any promises. I’ll wrap up things here so I don’t have to leave you guys hanging and I’ll focus on my other fics for now.

I hope you enjoyed reading Cartographer! Overall, I’ve had a blast writing it. Thank you so much for everything <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!